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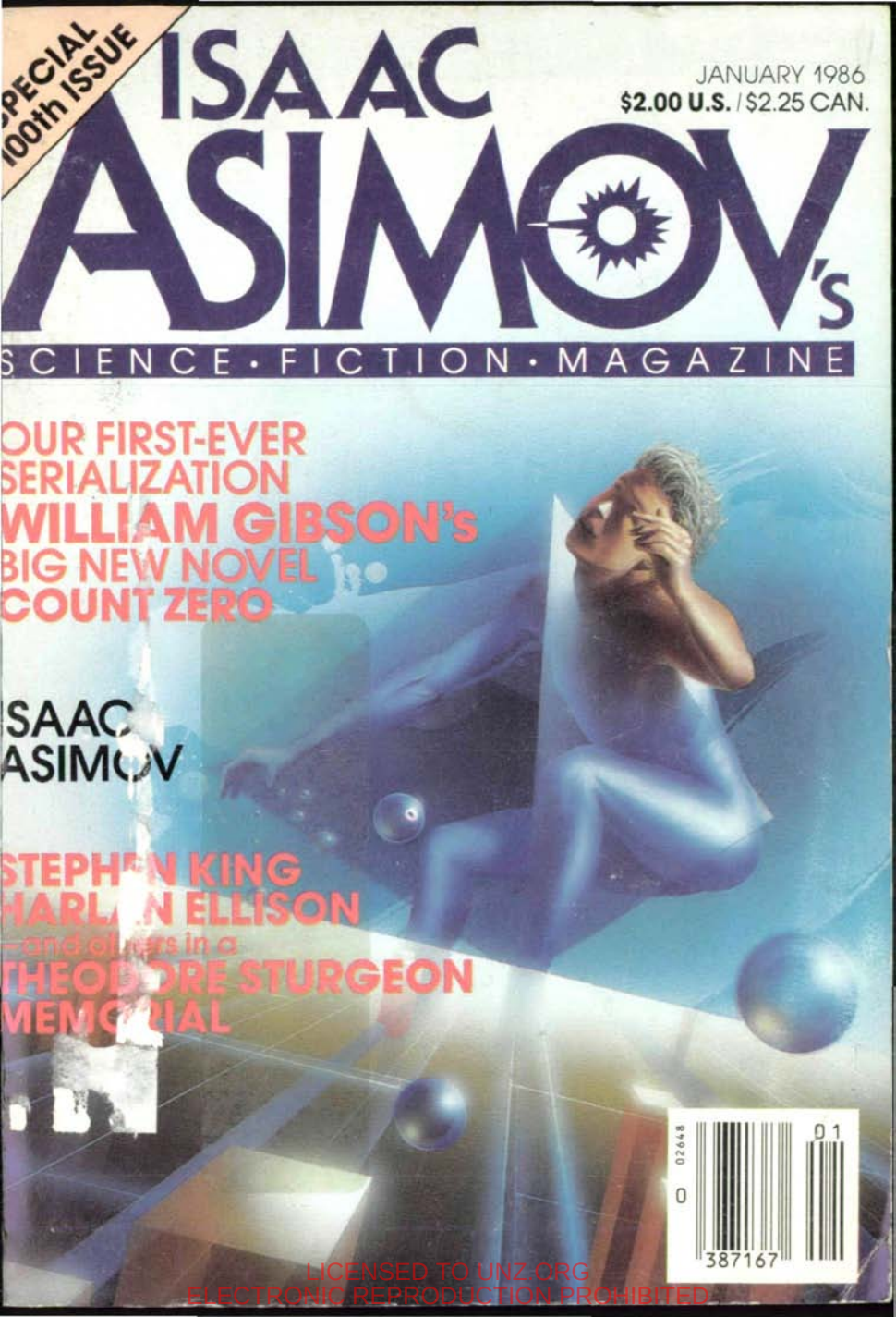

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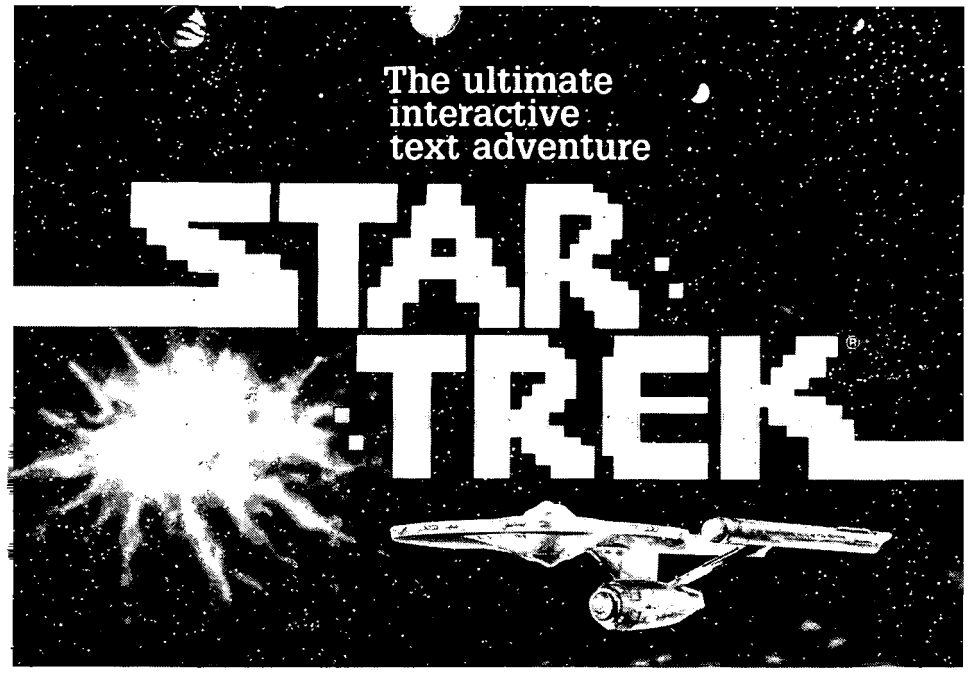

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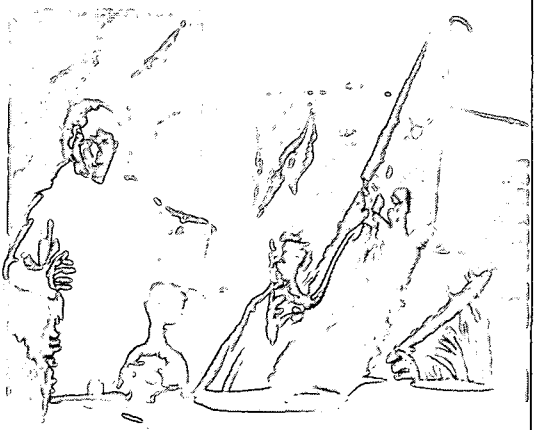

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83

94

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Vol. 10 No. 1 (whole No. 100)
January 1986
Next issue on sale
January 14, 1986

Serial

106 Count Zero (Part One of Three)—William Gibson

Short Stories

38 Pretty Boy Crossover—Pat Cadigan
52 Reduction—Gregory Frost and John Kessel
66 Special Education—Tim Sullivan
83 Jeff Beck—Lewis Shiner
94 The Eye of the Beholder—Isaac Asimov

Departments

4 Editorial: Old Hundredth—Isaac Asimov
10 Letters
18 Blues in the Night—Martin Gardner
20 Gaming—Dana Lombardy
24 Viewpoint: Theodore Sturgeon: 1918-1985—Harlan Ellison, Damon Knight, Isaac Asimov, Brian W. Aldiss, Stephen King, Somtow Sucharitkul
178 On Books: Must There Be War?—Norman Spinrad
187 Index to 1985
191 Mooney's Module—Gerry Mooney
192 The SF Conventional Calendar—Erwin S. Strauss

Poems by Robert Frazier, Roger Meador, and Peter Payack

Cover art for "Count Zero" by Hisaki Yasuda

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EDITORIAL

by Isaac Asimov

OLD HUNDREDTH

This is the 100th issue of *Isaac Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine!*

It was on December 16, 1976, that the first issue of the magazine was placed in my hands, and now, nine years and one day later, the 100th issue has reached the newsstand.

Those of you who can multiply nine by twelve in a flash and then add one, might wonder why this isn't the 109th issue, since that is the number with which a monthly magazine should open its tenth year. If, however, you are an old-timer who has been reading the magazine from the start, you will remember that we were a quarterly in the first year and a bi-monthly in the second year, losing fourteen monthly issues.

Then, in the last five years, we have been a tetraweekly, publishing every four weeks and gaining an issue each year. Subtracting five from fourteen means that we are still nine issues behind and that's why this is the 100th issue and not the 109th. (And you thought there was no advantage to knowing higher mathematics!)

There is great personal satisfaction to me in the fact that this magazine has endured a hundred issues. After the first number of *Galaxy Science Fiction*, dated October, 1950, hit the newsstands, dozens of still newer science fiction magazines have been launched, and during the thirty-five years that have elapsed, only *Asimov's* has lasted as many as a hundred issues.

I don't say this vauntingly, or triumphantly. If you want me to be honest, I say it only with heartfelt relief. When the magazine first appeared, I had no way of knowing how long it would last, and, as a matter of fact, I made no secret of my less-than-total confidence but admitted to it in my first editorial. Here's what I said:

"Now what about the magazine itself? Life is risky for magazines in these days of television and paperbacks so we are starting as a quarterly. What reader support we'll get is now in the lap of the gods, but if things go as we earnestly hope they do, we will work our way up to monthly as soon as we can."

There! You have to admit that that does not breathe jubilant self-assurance. I prepared myself for a quick demise—after all, almost all

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new science fiction magazines last only a few issues—and steeled myself for the possibly sarcastic or sardonic comments in the fan magazines.

As a matter of fact, I did not have to wait for the magazine to die before experiencing those comments. One fan magazine (and by no means the least important), after reviewing the first issue with less than heartfelt praise, and without even waiting for the second, gave it six issues to live, at most.

In a way, I was glad of that. It gave me a reason to *make* the magazine live—if only to show the gentleman he was wrong. I reminded Joel Davis that one had to be prepared to take initial losses (a reminder our Steadfast Publisher did not need), I urged George Scithers (our first editor) to get the best stories that were available, and I set about writing the most provocative and bouncy editorials I could—and here we still are, having passed that snide prediction by a mere ninety-four issues.

If I sound as though it were I, singlehandedly, who did this, I am misleading you, of course. I merely mention my part. The biggest parts were carried through by the editors who have run this magazine with thought and with devotion.

To be sure, I helped them do this by my firm insistence on never, in any way, interfering with their decisions and policies. When they asked my advice, I gave it, but there it ended. Once, Shawna handed back an item I had given

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her, and said, "Oh, boy, I'll have to explain this to Joel." To which I said, "No, you don't. You're editor, and you don't have to explain your decisions to anyone," and took the item back.*

Am I now confident that we are eternal? Of course not. Admittedly, the magazine is not only still alive but is actually better off, as far as circulation and earnings are concerned, than ever before in its still-short history, thanks in large part to Shawna's daring and (in all honesty) chance-taking editorial policies.

Nevertheless, we can no more predict the future now than we could nine years ago. *Galaxy*, the last successful science fiction magazine before our own, began with a terrific bang. It took only three issues for it to establish itself as a dangerous competitor to the hitherto unassailable *Astounding Science Fiction*. And yet, through a long and complicated series of events, most of which were completely beyond the powers of its series of editors to cope with, the magazine declined and fell at last.

And so it may be with us—but I assure you we will put up the good fight, and that as far as it lies with Joel and with me and with the editors and staff to influence events, we will see to it that *Asimov's* continues to improve in both quality and profitability, and that it will ascend rather than decline.

But there's one sad development that I must explain in connection with this issue. You have probably already become aware of it, but as of this issue, Shawna is no long editor of the magazine. In a way it was inevitable. She had done so outstanding a job, and I have so incautiously let everyone know about it, that sooner or later some predatory outsider was bound to make her an offer she couldn't refuse. When she told me about it (before she told anyone else) I asked her how much more money she was getting—with the full intention of sweet-talking Joel into matching the rise. However, she told me it was not a matter of money but of career opportunities, and with that I could not argue. I forced a smile and gave her my paternal blessing.

Shawna joined the magazine as assistant editor in its 10th issue and by the 11th she was an associate editor. With the 34th issue, she became the managing editor. She retained that position when Kathleen Moloney became our second editor with the 51st issue, supplying useful continuity. Then, when Kathleen received an offer *she* couldn't refuse (I suppose it's a sign of the quality of our choices that others keep trying to lure them away), Shawna finally became our third editor with our 61st issue.

With that same issue, sweet Sheila Williams joined our editorial staff and quickly advanced to managing editor. She will remain in that post so that now it is her turn to supply the much needed

*Don't feel bad. I sold it elsewhere.

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THE PAST

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continuity. I am thinking of preparing an "Agreement to Remain in Perpetuity" for her to sign, but she tells me that the thirteenth amendment to the constitution prevents her from accepting it. (Maybe she's putting me on? Is there such a thing as a thirteenth amendment?)

But, of course, we need an editor, too, and it was our great, good fortune, that when Shawna sounded out Gardner Dozois for the post, he proved receptive. He talked to Joel and he talked to me and there were no doubts anywhere. Gardner Dozois became our fourth editor and maybe he will sign the "Agreement to Remain in Perpetuity." Perhaps he hasn't heard about the thirteenth amendment (assuming there is one).

Unlike our first three editors, Gardner is himself a major writer. In fact, he won a Nebula in both 1984 and 1985, and is very highly thought of in the field. (Nebula-winning and high-thinking do not necessarily go together.)

To be sure, I'm the first to admit that being a good writer does not necessarily make one a good editor, either (look at me!), but Gardner has had interesting editorial experience as well. For one thing he was in at the conception, helping George Scithers get *Asimov's* started. And he has edited a best of the year anthology for a number of years and done a magnificent job at it.

Naturally, each editor brings his (or her) own aims and purposes to the magazine, but Gardner has openly admired Shawna's stewardship and I don't suppose there will be any hairpin turns this time.

Gardner, who lives in Philadelphia, will work chiefly from there (as George Scithers did) but will be in twice a week or so. He and I will remain in contact then, or by telephone, or through sweet Sheila who will, of course, be in the office every day.

One thing, though, and Gardner himself, brought it up. He said, "You will have to change your editorial adjective, Isaac. You can scarcely refer to me as 'beauteous.' "

"No, indeed," said the beauteous Shawna.

"Nor 'sweet,' " said sweet Sheila.

I looked at Gardner forlornly and had to admit that those adjectives would not suit him. I said, "Well, Gardner, I will have to call you 'our Chestertonian editor.' "—And anyone who has ever seen a photograph of G. K. Chesterton will know I have chosen well. ●

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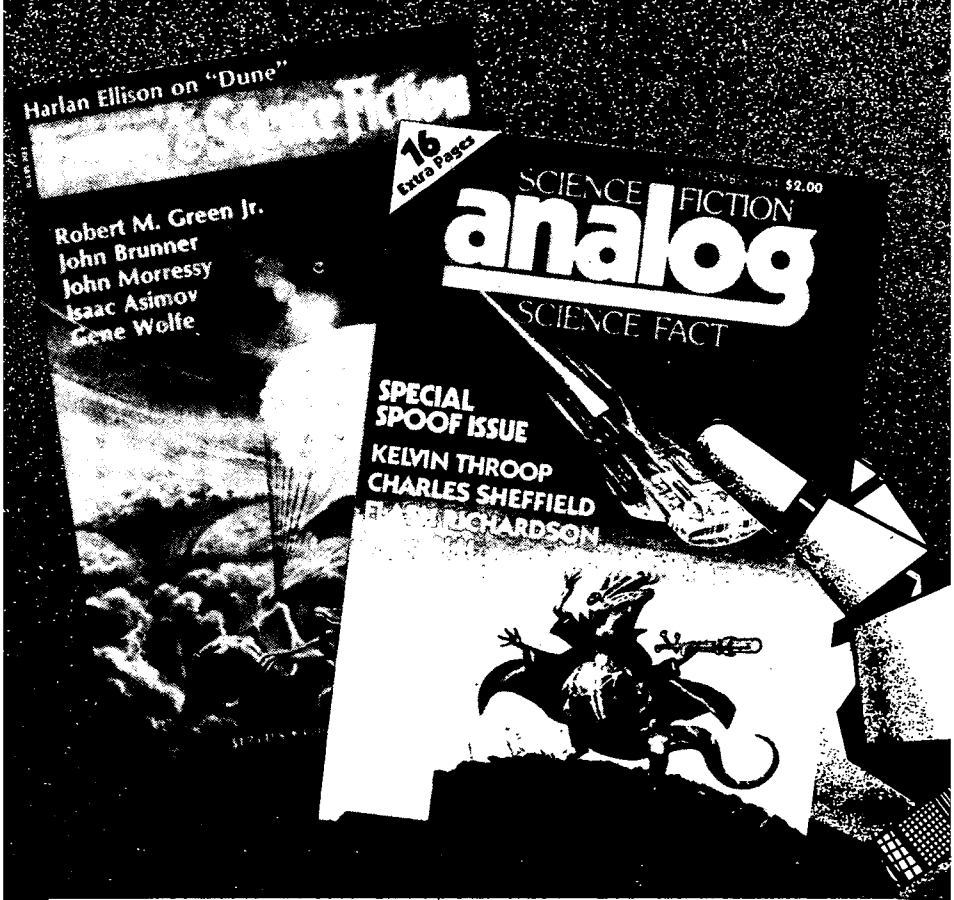

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LETTERS

Dear Mr. Asimov,

I read every science fiction short story anthology my local public library buys—even yours—but I have never shelled out my own "pin money" for the stuff.

This year, in an effort to maybe increase my chances at that magazine sweepstakes that comes to your mailbox the same time as income tax forms, I licked your magazine's stamp.

Having conveniently forgotten about it, I was surprised to find your May issue in my March mail.

"Ol' Izzy's sold out, cashing in on his name," was my first impression as I gazed in dismay at the cover. My disappointment grew as I thumbed through the pages.

I tossed the magazine aside, considering it a loss. (I didn't win the sweepstakes, either.)

When I finally picked it up to read a few days later, the letters to the editor convinced me I had stumbled onto some kind of cult.

"This is a magazine for writers, not readers," I surmised.

Then I read the first story, "Dinner in Audoghast." I skipped the poem and read the next story, and the next story, and the next, and the next, until I was at the back cover much too soon.

I will continue to haunt the science fiction section of my library. I'll also remember to watch my mail for your magazine.

I don't know about next year's sweepstakes, though.

Sincerely,

Linda L. Nelson
Moline, IL

Well, I guess reading a magazine is one way of deciding if it's any good. It's a drastic way, I suppose, but it seems to work. And who on Earth is "ol' Izzy," Lindarino?

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Dr. Asimov,

This letter could not wait to be written. The June and July issues of *IAsfm* brought two of the best SF stories that I've read this year. I refer to Sheffield's "Tunicate, Tunicate, Wilt Thou Be Mine," and Zelazny's "24 Views Of Mt. Fuji, By Hokusai." These two tales were beautifully told, with good ideas, and interesting characters. Speaking of which—

In the debate of character over idea, put me firmly on the side of the idea people. Of my five favorite authors: Heinlein, Ellison, Niven, Clement, and Asimov, all write idea stories. If you put any character in the situations which these authors create, the story would not

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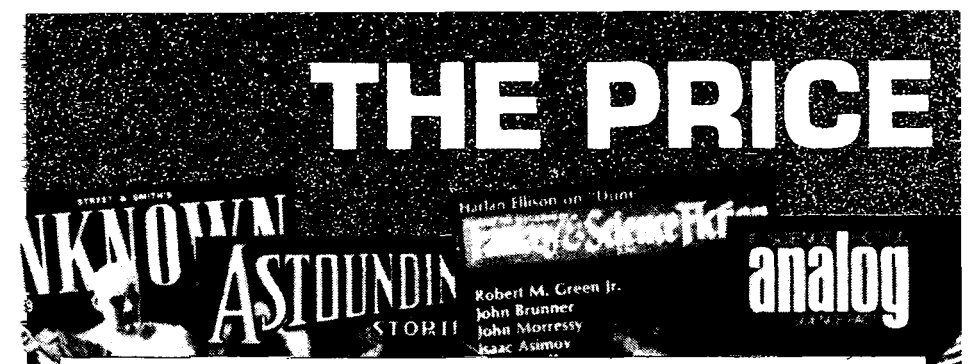

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be lost (of course I exaggerate a little).

But, I have gotten away from the main point of this letter: to heap praise on Messrs. Sheffield and Zelazny. Both captured the inner turmoil of their characters beautifully. The climaxes were expertly staged and executed, and both stories brilliantly illuminate the very human problem of loneliness. Please bring us more stories like these.

Sincerely,

Tim Fitzgibbons
170 Norlen Park
Bridgewater, MA 02324

Notice how fashions in titles change? In my early days, it used to be "Nightfall," "Reason," "Liar!" Now it's "Tunicate, Tunicate, Wilt Thou Be Mine" and "24 Views of Mt. Fuji, By Hokusai." Maybe this is worth an editorial. Let me think about it.

—Isaac Asimov

Re Viewpoint Poll,

If I must choose, or am asked to choose between characterization, and ideas, I choose ideas. I agree with Spinrad that SF is a literature of ideas, and that without the ideas there is only the setting of SF, but not true SF. I find that when a story that is without a strong idea fails I am often left with the feeling that I have wasted my time. An interesting mood, or a good character is not in itself enough to justify my having spent time reading a story that failed as a whole. When a story with a strong idea fails I always have the idea to think about. If the idea was worth writing about, and worthy of being published then it is often enough to justify the time I spent wading through poor characterization, or a story that didn't work well as a whole. Often times hard SF fails due to an author's inability to cope with the task of creating a well rounded story from a strong central idea, but the successes and failures of stories with ideas are what makes SF unique from other forms of literature.

Sincerely,

Eric Schultheis
Goleta, CA

I tend to find those letters that agree with me to be better written and more worth printing, but truth is mighty and will prevail. The majority were in favor of Norman.

—Isaac Asimov

Greetings,

To start with when I started to read books on a regular basis it was not unusual for me to not only talk but write in long almost meaningless sentences that were utterly devoid of proper punctuation marks. (See above for example.)

I grew up thinking all my teachers were abnormal. Not one of them ever had a kind word for my choice of reading material, science fiction of course. To a young inquisitive mind like mine, the lure of the ideas found in the stories was very strong. It kept me coming back for more and more. My brain seemed to be a bottomless pit. I just could not get enough of the new and/or different ideas. At this time of my life, I paid very little attention to the emotions of the characters.

When I reflect upon my apathy

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for the characters and their problems, an idea comes to me to explain the reason for it. As a grade schooler, I led a protected life. I attended a parochial school until my fifteenth year. My mother tried to keep the real world outside of her house. The only emotions I had ever experienced, with any regularity, were the fun of play, and the pain of physical injury. The emotions that the people in the stories were experiencing were alien to my emotionally inexperienced mind. Because they were alien, my mind could not assimilate them and just passed by.

As I got older, I became more aware of the real world, and as a matter of course, was subjected to an ever widening range of emotional experience. I grew up, matured, became a grownup. Call it what you wish. I no longer saw the world through rose colored glasses. I took my responsibilities seriously.

Now, my choice for favorite aspect of a story changed to a love for adventure. But this was short lived, for the more I read adventure styled stories, I became increasingly more aware that the motivations of the characters dictated the course of the action.

I find in my reading nowadays, that I will soon forget much of the story, if the characters are not outstanding, in their own way, be they good or evil.

This is not to say that a story with weak characterization cannot still be an enjoyable tale. But I believe you cannot have a truly classic story without strong, definite characters in it. I guess you would have to say that I would vote a slight edge to the characterization over "ideas." Sorry Doc.

Eternally yours,

Robert G. Feldt
Ellis, KS

See what I mean? But that's all right. Norman assures me I have good characters, and he should know.

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Good Doctor Isaac & Staff:

Although I am a long time fan and would-be writer, I have never written a letter to the editor before. As a timid type, I have both enjoyed and suffered in silence.

Which brings me to the point. Although you have always had a high quality publication and the quality re style and other literary attributes have increased in the past couple of years, I am enjoying it less—far less. Now I have read your Viewpoints and editorials concerning such matters as different types of stories, symbolism, satire, etc., and recognize that they have a certain validity and that different kinds of stories have a right to be printed if they are good, still they strike me as increasingly defensive as to an increasing number of readers who are displeased by the regular fare being served up in the magazine. The editorial and Viewpoint views expressed are to the effect that "Mama and Papa know best."

It appears to me that *Isaac Asimov's* is being turned into a new *New Worlds—America,* or a resuscitated New Wave, à lá J. G. Ballard, really mainstream with a slight veneer of SF and/or Fantasy.

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Now I enjoy both science fiction and fantasy, also an occasional good satire or symbolic piece. What I *don't* enjoy is issue after issue of very little else except downbeat gloom and woe and death, death, death. One can get this from any newspaper. Most of your stories are set in the here-and-now with little sense of wonder.

I used to think that maybe, if I improved my skill sufficiently, and with a little luck, I might be able to get published myself in *IAsfm*. But now I feel it is totally hopeless. Even if I were great, I could never do the kind of story you currently are publishing. So think at least somewhat of your readers and would-be writers who enjoy what we term "Real" SF and fantasy, with some sense of wonder, hope, and joy.

To end on a positive note, your features are generally good, especially the late Tom Rainbow's essays and the editorials. The one story which I really liked in recent months was Robert Silverberg's "Sailing to Byzantium," although I got the feeling it was a portion of a novel.

Thank you for your attention.

Ms. Betty Knight
Los Angeles, CA

P.S. Please excuse the typos. I'm not one of your rich folks with a word processor. All I've got is an elderly, light portable. Manual yet.

Now, now, we don't say "Mamma and Pappa know best." We just say that we are trying to find and publish the most powerful and affecting stories we can find. If they're downbeat, well—some of the best items ever written are downbeat. There's no happy ending in "Hamlet," or "King Lear," or "Oedipus Rex."

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Dr. Asimov,

After a six month hiatus from your magazine for various reasons including lack of time because of a full-time job and putting the finishing touches on my master essay, I returned to the back issues of your magazine that I have been neglecting. It was with unmitigated joy that I resumed the reading of your magazine. I have devoured two issues in a few days and I am eagerly reading the four other issues without the waiting period between issues. This respite from your magazine has made me grow fonder of the type of science fiction I have always enjoyed in your magazine.

Best Wishes,

Chester S. Mylenek
Detroit, MI

I'm sometimes criticized for printing too many letters of praise. It doesn't seem that way to me. I'm constantly putting in letters of complaint so I can feel strong and honest. Then I get one like this and I hesitate. —Well, the heck with it. I can use a little praise in print and so can good old Gardner and sweet Sheila.

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Dr. Asimov:

Having just read your editorial on plagiarism, I am worried. I hope that you can give me your opinion, please. The situation is this: I recently finished Marion Zimmer

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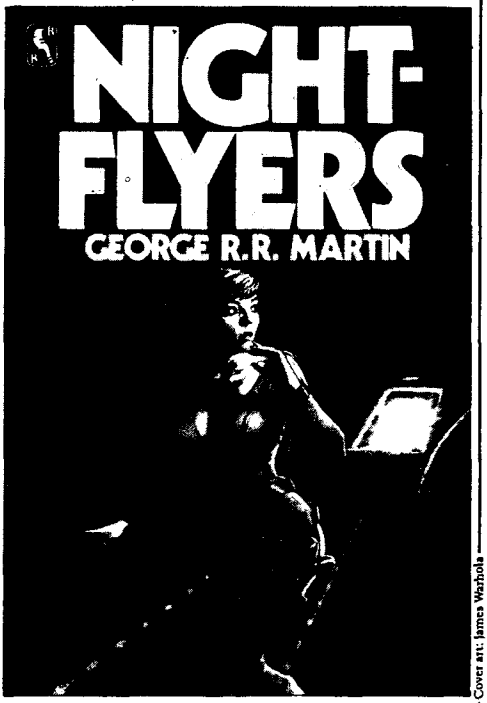

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***SCIENCE FICTION REVIEW**

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Bradley's book, *Sword and Sorceress II*, and I enjoyed it very much. (I am sure that Ms. Bradley would love to hear that!) Now comes the problem; I am one of the many people who enjoy fantasy role playing games, and after reading a story in Ms. Bradley's book, I thought it would make an excellent scenario. Then I read your editorial on plagiarism. My question is this, would it be considered plagiarism if I used the story as a scenario for the group that I game with? Please reply soon!

Sincerely,

John M. Aldrich
Cleveland, TN

P.S. Where do people send their manuscripts to for *constructive* criticism, if not to professional writers like yourself?

If you want to make use of a story as a basis for something else, you write to the author and get permission. No permission, no use. As to where one can get constructive criticism, I would say by turning to people whose business it is such as teachers and editors, provided they have time, or to people who do it for money, like agents, provided you can afford it.

—Isaac Asimov

ODE TO SCIENCE FICTION'S NATIONAL MONUMENT

I met a traveler from a future world
Who said: Two vast and stony hands do lie
Deep in Manhattan. Near them, sideburns curled,
Bespectacled, a beaming visage sits, whose bolo tie,
And ready smile, and manuscripts unfurled,
Tell that its sculptor well those volumes knew
(*In Joy Still Felt, In Memory Yet Green*)
Which yet enrich their maker's revenue.
And on the foundation's edge, these words are there:
"My name is IsaacAsimov, SF's Dean—
Look on my works, ye authors, and despair!"
I thought that this creature was a statue weighty
Until it roared "Out!" and kicked me down the stair
And started a-pecking at its TRS-80.

Jean Mackay Jackson
Tulsa, OK

The tramping of a prophet, see! O Mind
If Percy comes, can Jean be far behind?

—Isaac Asimov

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A BANTAM SPECTRA BOOK

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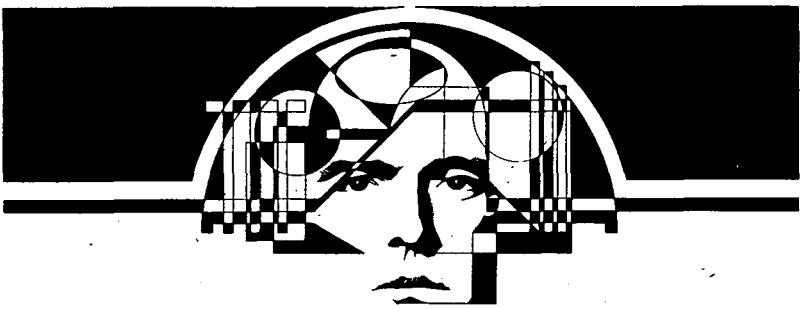
MARTIN GARDNER

BLUES IN THE NIGHT



Chromo, readers may remember, is a small planet inhabited by three races of humanoids. Each has a distinctive skin color: pink, blue, or green.

A murder trial is in progress on Chromo, and a police officer is testifying. All policemen on Chromo are, of course, blue.

"We got this message at headquarters," said the cop, "that a woman in the pink section of the city was screaming like she was being attacked. I arrived at the apartment building just in time to see a green man run out the front door. I gave chase, but the man got away."

"Are you positive he was green?" asked the attorney for the defense. The suspect on trial for the woman's murder was a green.

"Well," said the cop, massaging the side of his blue face. "I can't say I'm absolutely sure. It was in the middle of the night and the lights on that street are not so good."

The defense lawyer then introduced to the court the results of a test that had been made of the officer's ability to distinguish a blue from a green under the lighting conditions that had prevailed in the street during the night of the murder. The policeman had accurately recognized a man's color 80 percent of the time. In other words, he was mistaken one time out of five.

A few days later the jurors found themselves debating the following question: How probable is it that the man seen fleeing the scene of the crime was actually blue?

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"I can't see any difficulty here," said one of the pink women on the jury. "The policeman is right 4/5 of the time and mistaken 1/5 of the time. He said he thought the man was green. So the probability he really was a green is 4/5, and the probability he was a blue is 1/5."

"You couldn't be more wrong," said a green juror. "You forget that in this city blues outnumber greens by a ratio of 85 to 15."

"I know that," said a pink juror. "So what? How can it affect the way we estimate the probability that the policeman made a mistake when he said the man was green?"

Which juror is right? It's a very tricky question, and likely to give you a headache when you think about it. The fact that in the city there are 85 blues for every 15 greens is background information that in Bayesian probability theory is called the "base rate." Is it relevant to the question? Or should one reason, as the pink juror did, that the probability of the fleeing man being blue is 1/5?

Try to analyze this confusing situation before you check the answer on page 91.

HARMONY OF THE SPHERES AT SPION KOP

At Antietam the sunken road
retained August's light
as if Prometheus, galled
beyond measure,
studied
and understood
the peculiar properties of
light
and got loose.
And got revenge.

—Roger Meador

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GAMING

by Dana Lombardy

Have you ever fantasized about tossing a grenade at an obnoxious tailgater following you with his car, mile after mile? Or perhaps you'd like to teach some road courtesy to that jerk that keeps cutting in and out of traffic, endangering everyone. Just flip off the safety on your forward-firing, hood-mounted machine guns and . . .

Although we may be tempted to think such thoughts in real life, the only acceptable way to vent our highway frustrations may be with the new Deluxe Edition of Car Wars, a science-fiction game that combines the elements of role-playing with a unique board game format ($16.95 at your local store, or direct from Steve Jackson Games Inc., Box 18957, Austin, TX 78760-8957).

In 2024, race car driver "Crazy" Joe Harshman won a demolition derby contest by mounting an old machine gun on his car and blasting his way to victory. His feat gave rise to a new sport—autodueling. The Armadillo Autoduel Arena, first of its kind, was founded in Austin, Texas, and autodueling slowly replaced combat football as the most popular television sport. After a few years, autodueling was legalized in thirty-nine states and most Americans began putting armor and weapons on their vehicles.

The original version of Car Wars was packaged in a small plastic "Pocket Box" and sold over 100,000 copies. It won a Charles Roberts Award in 1982 for "Best SF Board Game" and became so popular that numerous supplements and expansion sets were published, including a digest-size magazine for Car Wars fans, Autoduel Quarterly.

The Deluxe Edition comes in a standard 9-by-12-inch box and contains an expanded 64-page rulebook, three sheets of cardboard counters representing cars, other vehicles, and weapons such as smokescreens, three 21-by-32-inch mapsheets, three sheets of road sections and two "turning keys" to determine maneuvers during play.

Except for the new rulebook, all of the components in the Deluxe Edition were previously released in Car Wars supplements Crash City (formerly Sunday Drivers), Truck Stop, and Expansion Kit # 1. The road sections have been printed on heavier cardstock than those in the original Pocket Box game.

After Car Wars was released in 1981, many updates and modifications were made to the original rules. The Deluxe Edition brings together all these in one complete reference book. Car Wars rules were previously printed in small 3-by-6-inch booklets to fit into the Pocket Box. Information that had to be frequently referenced during

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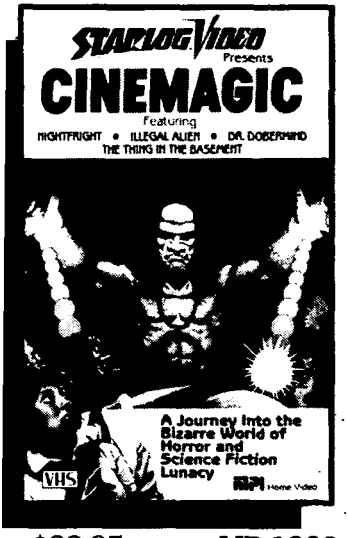

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play was scattered between several small booklets and separate sheets of charts because of the space restrictions of the Pocket Box. In the Deluxe Edition, the rules are in one expanded volume that are well indexed. There is a new set of "Jumpstart Rules" for beginners designed to get you playing the game quickly.

You may design your own car, cycle, or van, or choose from the two pages of sample vehicles provided. Off-road vehicles, large 18-wheel trucks, buses, and even helicopters are also available.

To design an autoduel vehicle, you begin with a given amount of cash to spend, such as $10,000. With this, you "purchase" component parts including tires, body armor, power plant (electric engine), and weapons. Chassis size, ranging from light to extra heavy, determines the weight available for the completed vehicle. Handling Class (the ability to maneuver) is determined by the suspension system chosen. Power plants govern the maximum speed and acceleration the vehicle can achieve. Weapons, ranging from machine gun to lasers, are limited by their weight, their cost, and the amount of space they require. You can "build" a competitive vehicle, but because of design trade-offs, it's not possible to create an indestructible, super-fast death machine.

For example, with $10,000 you can build a "Mini Sherman"—a compact car with standard chassis, heavy suspension, large power plant, heavy duty tires, and good armor. It can accelerate well and offers excellent handling. The final cost of only $8,334 means that you still have enough money to replace the twin front machine guns or the smokescreen in the rear with something more substantial, such as a laser gun.

The Vehicle Planning Sheet makes such designing easy by listing all component parts available with separate columns for weight, space, price, and how much more can still be added after another part is purchased for the vehicle.

Playing the game is simple. Each turn is divided into 10 phases. The faster a vehicle is going, the more phases it can move in, advancing 1/8 inch each phase. At speeds of 110 mph or higher, vehicles move 1/4 inch in some or all phases. Movement is done by pushing the counters representing the vehicles over the road sections provided. As you come to the end of one road section you put down another. The road is an ever-growing and changing game board.

Combat is resolved by rolling dice. Each weapon has a "To Hit" number and a "Damage" number. You first roll two dice to see if you hit the target; the total of this dice roll must be equal to or higher than the To Hit number for the weapon to hit the target. The dice roll total is modified for target type, target speed, etc.

If you hit the target, you then roll a specified number of dice to determine how much damage the hit caused.

Gamers who already play Car Wars will find the new rulebook speeds up play considerably. The sturdier road sections also make the Deluxe Edition worthy of consideration even if you own the original version. If you've never played the Car Wars, but the idea of blowing away cardboard road hogs appeals to you, the Deluxe Edition is highly recommended. ●

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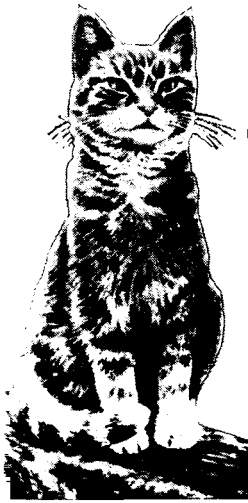

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TAD WILLIAMS

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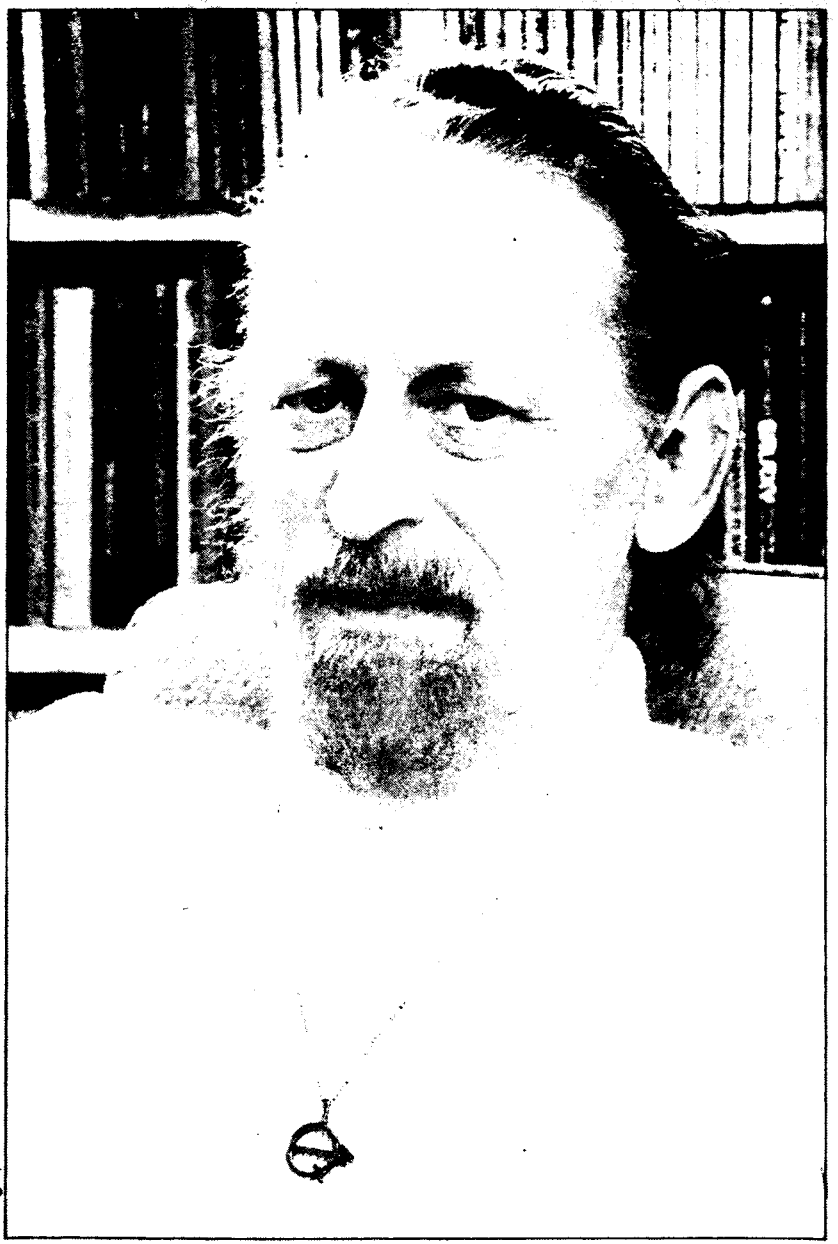

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VIEWPOINT

THEODORE STURGEON: 1918-1985

The late Theodore Sturgeon was one of the true giants of the field, a seminal figure whose influence on the development of science fiction itself is hard to overestimate. Sturgeon was one of the best short-story writers ever to work in the genre, and even a partial listing of his short fiction would include many stories—"It," "Microcosmic God," "Killdozer," "Bianca's Hands," "The Other Celia," "The Other Man," "Baby Is Three"—which helped to expand the boundaries of the science fiction story and push it in the direction of artistic maturity.

Here are six memorial tributes and personal reminiscences of Sturgeon, contributed by a wide range of his colleagues—from Sturgeon's peers from the Golden Age of *Astounding* to younger writers who grew up on Sturgeon's work. Together they make up a moving remembrance of a man who was loved and respected by all who knew him, and whose work shaped the very nature of science fiction itself.

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VIEWPOINT

Harlan Ellison

It began raining in Los Angeles tonight at almost precisely the minute Ted Sturgeon died in Eugene, Oregon. Edward Hamilton Waldo would have cackled at the cosmic silliness of it; but I didn't. It got to me; tonight, May 8th, 1985.

It had been raining for an hour, and the phone rang. Jayne Sturgeon said, "Ted left us an hour ago, at 7:59."

I'd been expecting it, of course, because I'd talked to him—as well as he could gasp out a conversation with the fibrosis stealing his breath—early in March, long distance to Haiku, Maui, Hawaii. Ted had written his last story for me, for the *Medea* project; and we'd sent him the signature plates for the limited edition. He said to me, "I want you to write the eulogy."

I didn't care to think about that. I said, "Don't be a pain in the ass, Ted. You'll outlive us all." Yeah, well, he *will*, on the page; but he knew he was dying, and he said it again, and insisted on my promise. So I promised him I'd do it, and a couple of weeks ago I came home late one night to find a message on my answering machine: it was Ted, and he'd come home, too. Come home to Oregon to die, and he was calling to say goodbye. It was only a few words, huskingly spoken, each syllable taking it out of him, and he gave me his love, and he reminded me of my promise; and then he was gone.

Now I have to say important words, extracted from a rush of colliding emotions. About a writer and a man who loomed large, whose faintest touch remains on everyone he ever met, whose talent was greater than the vessel in which it was carried, whose work influenced at least two generations of the best young writers, and whose brilliance remains as a reminder that this poor genre of dreams and delusions can be literature.

Like a very few writers, his life was as great a work of artistic creation as the stories. He was no myth, he was a legend. Where he walked, the ether was disturbed by his passage.

For some he was the unicorn in the garden; for others he was a

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profligate who'd had ten hot years as the best writer in the country, regardless of categorizations (even the categorization that condemned him to the ghetto); for young writers he was an icon; for the old hands who'd lived through stages of his unruly life he was an unfulfilled promise. Don't snap at me for saying this: he liked the truth, and he wouldn't care to be remembered sans limps and warts and the hideous smell of that damned grape-scented pipe tobacco he smoked.

But who the hell needs the truth when the loss is still so painful? Maybe you're right: maybe we shouldn't speak of that.

It's only been an hour and a half since Jayne called, as I write this, and my promise to Ted makes me feel like the mommy who has to clean up her kid's messy room. I called CBS radio, and I called the *Herald-Examiner,* and that will go a ways toward getting him the hail-and-farewell I think he wanted, even though I know some headline writer will say SCI-FI WRITER STURGEON DEAD AT 67.

And the kid on the night desk at the newspaper took the basics—Ted's age, his real name, the seven kids, all that—and then he said, "Well, can you tell me what he was known for? Did he win any awards?" And I got crazy. I said, with an anger I'd never expected to feel, "Listen, sonny, he's only gone about an hour and a half, and he was as good as you get at this writing thing, and no one who ever read *The Dreaming Jewels* or *More Than Human* or *Without Sorcery* got away clean because he could squeeze your heart till your life ached, and he was one of the best writers of the last half a century, and the tragedy of his passing is that *you* don't know who the fuck he was!" And then I hung up on him, because I was angry at his ignorance, but I was *really* angry at Ted's taking off like that, and I'm angry that I'm trying to write this when I don't know what to write, and I'm furious as hell that Ted made me promise to do this unthinkable thing, which is having to write a eulogy for a man who could have written his own, or any other damned thing, better than I or any of the rest of us could do it.

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VIEWPOINT

Damon Knight

We began hearing his unique voice in 1939 when his first two stories were published, one in *Astounding,* the other in *Unknown:* "Ether Breather" and "A God in a Garden." Through the forties his work appeared often in *Astounding,* although he was going his own way even then and was never in philosophy a member of Campbell's group. Some of his most compelling works were fantasies—"It," for example, and "Bianca's Hands."

Sturgeon showed us that prose can be something more than a blunt instrument, even in science fiction. He worked lovingly with the sounds of words and their rhythms, and taught more by example than the rest of us by precept. In the fifties he was the star turn of the brilliant circus assembled by H.L. Gold for *Galaxy,* with stories like "Rule of Three," "The Other Celia," "Saucer of Loneliness," and "The Stars Are the Styx." *Galaxy* also published "Baby Is Three," the first segment of his award-winning novel *More Than Human.*

Those were the years when he was taking love apart to see what made it tick—not just the conventional kind of love, but all the other kinds too. His "The World Well Lost," published in 1953, was almost certainly the first sympathetic treatment of homosexual love in science fiction. "It is fashionable," he wrote, "to overlook the fact that the old-shoe lover *loves* loving old shoes."

He was bearded and sandaled long before it was fashionable to be so; over the years his appearance grew more Christlike, and there was always something messianic in what he wrote. Love was his theme, not repentance; he also played the guitar and sang bawdy songs.

He had a lifelong glimpse of a way people could live better together. He tried to put it into practice and did not always succeed, because other people did not rise to his standards, but he never wavered and never gave up.

Isaac Asimov

It is now almost half a century since John Campbell took over

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the editorship of *Astounding* and began the "Golden Age," but I remember it as though it were yesterday. God, what exciting days those were.

Little by little, John gathered a stable of writers and learned the trick of keeping us rubbing our noses against the grindstone. One thing he did, in my case, was to tell me what the other members of his stable were doing. With the greatest enthusiasm, he would tell me that Robert Heinlein was "working on the following proposition." And A.E. van Vogt. And L. Sprague de Camp. And Lester del Rey.

And my heart would pound at the notion that John was equating me with those already-great men.

But of all those he mentioned, the one (it seemed to me) he mentioned with the greatest affection was Theodore Sturgeon. I can see him grinning now as he would hint at the manifold pleasures of something upcoming by Ted.

How I watched for his stories myself—I remember "It" and "Ether Breather" (his first) and "Shottle Bop" and "Yesterday was Monday" and "Killdozer"—and how eagerly I read them and how hopelessly I decided I couldn't match him. And I never could. He had a delicacy of touch that I couldn't duplicate if my fingers were feathers.

Soon enough I met him (we all met each other because we all visited Campbell and our paths were bound to cross) and he looked *exactly* like his stories. He was delicately handsome and had a soft, amused voice. (As I eventually found out, he was to women as catnip is to cats—and I envied that even more than I envied him his talent.)

But we all grow old. Nearly fifty years have passed and you *expect* people to grow old. But not Ted. He had no right to grow old. I still can't believe he did. . . .

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Brian W. Aldiss

Sturgeon? The name was magnetic. There it was, perpetually cropping up attached to the stories I most admired. Sturgeon: quite an ordinary Anglo-American word among exotics like A.E. van Vogt, Isaac Asimov, Heinlein, Simak, and Kuttner. Yet—spikey, finny, *odd*.

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VIEWPOINT

And it was not his original name. Theodore Hamilton Sturgeon was born Edward Hamilton Waldo. To the usual boring undeserving parents. That was on Staten Island, the year the First World War ended.

So there were two of him, as there are of many a good writer. A bright side, a dark side—much like our old SF image of Mercury, remember, so much more interesting than banal reality. He had a mercurial temperament.

The bright side was the side everybody loved. There was something so damned nice, charming, open, empathic, and *elusive* about Ted that women flocked to him. Men too. Maybe he was at the mercy of his own fey sexuality. If so, he was quizzical about it, as about everything. One of his more cutesy titles put it admirably: "If All Men Were Brothers, Would You Let One Marry Your Sister?" Not if it was Sturgeon, said a too-witty friend.

He played his guitar. He sang. He shone. He spoke of his philosophy of love.

Ted honestly brought people happiness. If he was funny, it was a genuine humor which sprang from seeing the world aslant. A true SF talent. Everyone recognized his strange quality, "faunlike," some nut dubbed it; faunlike he certainly looked. Inexplicable, really.

Unsympathetic stepfather, unsatisfactory adolescence. Funny jobs, and "Ether Breather" out in *Astounding* in 1939. So to an even funnier job, science fiction writer. It's flirting with disaster.

I could not believe those early stories: curious subject matter, bizarre resolutions, glowing style. And about sexuality. You could hardly believe your luck when one of Ted's stories went singing through your head.

"It," with Cartier illustrations, in *Unknown*. Terrifying. "Derm Fool." Madness. The magnificent "Microcosmic God," read and re-read. "Killdozer," appearing after a long silence. There were to be other silences. "Baby is Three": again the sense of utter incredibility with complete conviction, zinging across a reader's synapses. By a miracle, the blown-up version, *More Than Human*, was no disappointment either. This was Sturgeon's caviar dish. Better even than *Venus Plus X*, with its outré sexuality

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in a hermaphrodite utopia.

As for those silences. Something sank Sturgeon. His amazing early success, his popularity with fans and stardom at conventions—they told against the writer. Success is a vampire. In the midst of life we are in definite trouble. They say Sturgeon was the first author in the field ever to sign a six-book contract. A six-book contract was a rare mark of distinction, like being crucified. A mark of extinction. Ted was no stakhanovite and the deal did for him; he was reduced to writing a novelization of a schlock movie, "Voyage to the Bottom of the Sea," to fulfill his norms.

At one time, he was reduced further to writing TV pilot scripts for Hollywood. He lived in motels or trailers, between marriages, between lives. Those who read *The Dreaming Jewels* or *Venus Plus X* or the story collections forget that writing is secretly a heavy load, an endless battle against the disappointments which come from within as well as without—and reputation a heavier load. Ted was fighting his way back to the light when night came on.

About Ted's dark side.

Well, he wrote that memorable novel, *Some of Your Blood,* about this crazy psychotic who goes for drinking menstrual discharge. Actually, it does not taste as bad as Ted made out. That was his bid to escape the inescapable adulation.

One small human thing he did. He and I, with James Gunn, were conducting the writers' workshop at the Conference of the Fantastic at Boca Raton, Florida. This was perhaps three years ago.

Our would-be writers circulated their effusions around the table for everyone's comment. One would-be was a plump, pallid, unhappy lady. Her story was a fantasy about a guy who tried three times to commit suicide, only to be blocked each time by a green monster from Hell who wanted him to keep on suffering. Sounds promising, but the treatment was hopeless.

Dumb comments around the table. I grew impatient with their unreality. When the story reached me, I asked the lady right out, "Have you ever tried to commit suicide?"

Unexpected response. She stared at me in shock. Then she

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VIEWPOINT

burst into a hailstorm of tears, collapsing on to the table . . . "Three times," she cried. Everyone looked fit to faint.

"It's nothing to be ashamed of," I said. "I've tried it too."

"So have I," said Sturgeon calmly.

He needn't have come in like that. He just did it bravely, unostentatiously, to support me, to support her, to support everyone. And I would guess there was a lot of misery and disappointment in Ted's life, for all the affection he generated. Yet he remained kind, loving, giving. (The lady is improving by the way. We're still in touch. That's another story.)

If that does not strike you as a positive story, I'm sorry. I'm not knocking suicide, either. Everyone should try it at least once.

Ted was a real guy, not an idol, an effigy, as some try to paint him. He was brilliant, so he suffered. I know beyond doubt that he would be pleased to see me set down some of the bad times he had. He was not one to edit things out. Otherwise he would have been a less powerful writer.

There are troves of lovely Sturgeon tales (as in the collection labeled "E Pluribus Unicorn"), like "Bianca's Hands," which a new generation would delight in. He wrote well, if sometimes over-lushly. In many ways, Ted was the direct opposite of the big technophile names of his generation, like Doc Smith, Poul Anderson, Robert Heinlein, et al. His gaze was more closely fixed on people. For that we honored him, and still honor him. Good for him that he never ended up in that prick's junkyard where they pay you a million dollars advance for some crud that no sane man wants to read.

Ted died early in May in Oregon, of pneumonia and other complications. Now he consorts with Sophocles, Phil Dick, and the author of *Kama Sutra*. He had returned from a holiday in Hawaii, taken in the hopes he might recover his health there. That holiday, incidentally, was paid for by another SF writer—one who often gets publicity for the wrong things. Thank God, there are still some good guys left. We are also duly grateful for the one just departed.

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Stephen King

Not many newspapers have Sunday book sections these days; a couple of brief reviews courtesy of the wire services is usually the extent of it. Not many of those that do have such sections will have anything to say about the work of Theodore Sturgeon, who died of lung disease last week. Sturgeon, after all, was only a science fiction writer. In the pantheon of modern fiction, where distinctions of subject have hardened into a critical mindset almost as arbitrary and complete as the Hindu caste system, that means Sturgeon occupied a place on the literary ladder one rung above writers of westerns and one rung below the writers of mysteries.

Only a science fiction writer. But his often tender explorations of alien minds were as carefully worked out as Faulkner's exploration of the mind of Benjy, the idiot in *The Sound and the Fury*. Sturgeon's emphasis on psychology instead of blasters prepared the way for such modern masters of the genre as Robert Silverberg, Gregory Benford, John Varley, Kate Wilhelm. When science fiction made its crucial shift from pulp action to a careful consideration of what the future might hold for the emotions and the psyche as well as for the technotoybox, Sturgeon was in the van.

Only a science fiction writer, but in "Baby is Three" (part of *More Than Human*) and *The Dreaming Jewels* he brought Joycean stream-of-consciousness techniques to a field which until 1954 or so had considered the prose styles of such stalwarts as E.E. "Doc" Smith and Ray Cummings perfectly adequate.

Sturgeon and Philip José Farmer (who is also only a science fiction writer) broke the sex barrier almost by themselves during the 1950s—almost alone of their kind they dared propose that the sex life of science fiction might be more than cover deep. Sturgeon did it with *Some of Your Blood*, a giddy bravura tale of a vampire who drinks not from the jugular to kill but from the menstrual flow . . . as an act of love.

His stories in fact defy categorization—beyond that implied by the Richard Powers paperback covers or the Virgil

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VIEWPOINT

Finlay magazine illustrations, that is. He did in fact write horror stories as well as science fiction; long before Steven Spielberg's *Duel* or my *Christine,* Ted Sturgeon had linked the power train of an engine to fantasy in the nightmarish "Killdozer." He wrote social comedy satirizing the racial strife of the 1950s and early 1960s by creating love affairs between earthlings and aliens. He fulfilled the pulp dictum to create story before all else but the stories he created were told in an often transcending prose that almost sang as well as simply telling.

Only a science fiction writer was all Theodore Sturgeon was. Check the obits and see if I'm not right. But he also entertained, provoked thought, terrified, and occasionally enobled. He fulfilled, in short, all the qualifications we use to measure artistry in prose.

Perhaps the best comment on how quietly such a fine writer can pass from us—like an intelligent and witty guest who slips from a party where many less interesting folk are claiming greater attention by virtue of greater volume—in this: *Book World* okayed a piece by Ray Bradbury, Harlan Ellison, or me. By someone better known than Ted himself. A noisy party guest.

Considering the fact that he was only a science fiction writer, Theodore Sturgeon left exceedingly fine work behind him. Who knows? That work may be read and enjoyed long after the category itself has ceased to guarantee instant dismissal. That would be very fine.

Somtow Sucharitkul

The Sunday before Ted Sturgeon died, I received a call from Sharon Webb, who suggested that I call the Sturgeons. "I think he's dying," she told me. "I just spoke to him, he sounded as if he was saying goodbye." When I phoned him in Oregon, he spoke breathlessly, panting between words. I told him that my new book, *The Darkling Wind,* was dedicated to him. I had meant it to be a surprise, when it came out, but I knew it would be too late. Ted said, "I love you very much." "I love you too," I said. He said, "I

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know." Then he said, "Goodbye." I talked to Jayne for a while longer, but I was barely coherent from weeping. I heard his voice in the background; "Tell him, 'Thanks for the S.P. Phonecall.' " He was still making puns, weakened though he was. Only a few hours after I talked to him, I discovered, his already critical lung condition had become complicated by pneumonia, and he had gone to the hospital. He died three days later. His youngest son Andros told me, "I was there and it was beautiful."

When I was a child, I wanted to be exactly like Theodore Sturgeon when I grew up. This was because I discovered a short story called "The Skills of Xanadu" in an anthology in a carton of abandoned books on the floor of the library at the Bangkok British School. It was a story set in a universe of astonishing beauty and brutality, a universe ultimately redeemed by compassion. The story changed my life. Later I parlayed the story's theme into an entire tetralogy of my own, but you see, Ted had said it all in only twenty pages.

The more Theodore Sturgeon stories I read, the more I wanted to become just like him. I read *Some of Your Blood* when I was about ten years old; twenty years later I wrote a book, *Vampire Junction*, that is really nothing more than a homage to Ted's novella. It took me 150,000 words to Ted's 30,000, so in an infantile kind of way I presumed that the gap was narrowing.

I was still barely grownup when, at SunCon, eight years ago, I badgered and manipulated the people running the Hugo Banquet seating into sneaking me onto the very table where the Supreme Deity of my Personal Pantheon happened to be sitting. I had planned all these intelligent things to say, but I ended up rather tonguetied in his presence. Until Ted himself, perhaps noticing how hard I was sweating, started a conversation with me. I can't remember a thing about that conversation except the excitement I felt. It never occurred to me that Ted would still recall the incident, but years later I heard him say to Jayne, "You know, he was that kid at our banquet table." By then he had become my friend, but the aura of being "More than

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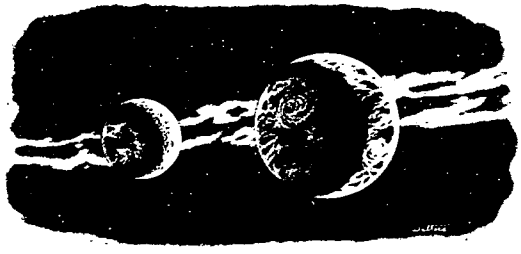
Human" never quite went away.

Once, before I knew Ted, I had a young friend who was sick. He had to stay in bed, and all he could do was talk on the telephone. He asked me to read him a story. I read him "Crate," by Theodore Sturgeon. In the story a bunch of kids, and their teacher, crashlands on this planet. There is a crate among the wreckage, and with her dying breath the teacher points it out to the kids and tells them they have to take it to the town because the whole world depends on it. They carry the crate through tough terrain, endure terrible despair and hardship, and grow from children into young men and women, and they finally reach the outpost, only to find that the crate is empty. The teacher had told them it was important, to give them a purpose, so they'd go on living until they could reach safety. Afterwards, the kid who's narrating the story says of the teacher, "You know, she really loved us."

That's how I feel about Ted. We all have to go on carrying the crate. As many have said, all of Ted's stories deal, in some way, with the idea of love. The same can be said of his life. Ted's love is in that crate, and if we think it's empty, we're wrong, because the things you can't see are the most important things in the world. ●

Harlan Ellison's eulogy originally appeared in *Locus*; Damon Knight's eulogy originally appeared in *Science Fiction Chronicle*; Isaac Asimov's eulogy originally appeared in *Locus*; Brian W. Aldiss's eulogy originally appeared in *Cheap Truth*; Stephen King's eulogy originally appeared in *The Washington Post Book World*; Somtow Sucharitkul's eulogy originally appeared, in somewhat altered form, in *Locus* and in *Fantasy Review*.



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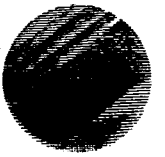
A QUOTELLA FOR TED STURGEON



"He left his bones in the
rubble of an alien land."
The Immense Journey
Loren Eiseley

He saw with eyes as fine as
supercooled conductors;
Left no step without accessing its reflection.
His skin interfaced with light.
Bones opened their pores to the night
In directionless spaces between
The known and the unknowable.
Rubble from the strange, colorful worlds
Of the imagination now covers his remains:
An uncommon grave for our uncommon brother.
Alien is each new footfall where his
Land ends and our tomorrow begins.

—Robert Frazier

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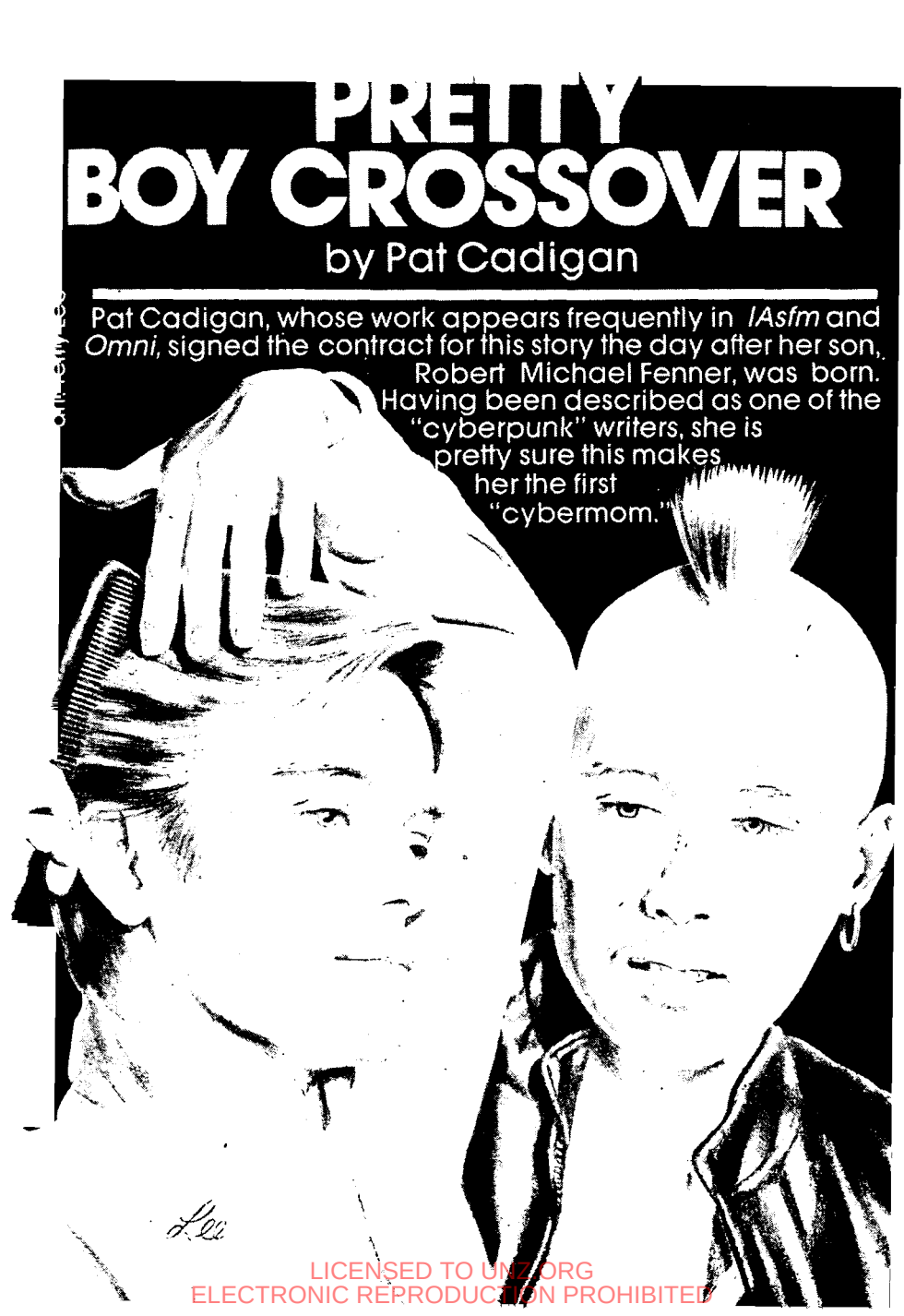
PRETTY BOY CROSSOVER

by Pat Cadigan

Pat Cadigan, whose work appears frequently in *IAsfm* and *Omni*, signed the contract for this story the day after her son, Robert Michael Fenner, was born. Having been described as one of the "cyberpunk" writers, she is pretty sure this makes her the first "cybermom."



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First you see video. Then you wear video. Then you eat video. Then you *be* video.

The Gospel According to Visual Mark

Watch or Be Watched.

Pretty Boy Credo

"Who made you?"

"You mean recently?"

Mohawk on the door smiles and takes his picture. "You in. But only you, okay? Don't try to get no friends in, hear that?"

"I hear. And I ain't no fool, fool. I got no friends."

Mohawk leers, leaning forward. "Pretty Boy like you, no friends?"

"Not in this world." He pushes past the Mohawk, ignoring the kissy-kissy sounds. He would like to crack the bridge of the Mohawk's nose and shove bone splinters into his brain but he is lately making more effort to control his temper and besides, he's not sure if any of that bone splinters in the brain stuff is really true. He's a Pretty Boy, all of sixteen years old, and tonight could be his last chance.

The club is Noise. Can't sneak into the bathroom for quiet, the Noise is piped in there, too. Want to get away from Noise? Why? No reason. But this Pretty Boy has learned to think between the beats. Like walking between the raindrops to stay dry, but he can do it. This Pretty Boy thinks things all the time—*all* the time. Subversive (and, he thinks so much that he knows that word *subversive*, sixteen, Pretty, or not). He thinks things like *how many Einsteins have died of hunger and thirst under a hot African sun* and *why can't you remember being born* and *why is music common to every culture* and especially *how much was there going on that he didn't know about and how could he find out about it.*

And this is all the time, one thing after another running in his head, you can see by his eyes. It's for def not much like a Pretty Boy but it's one reason why they want him. That he *is* a Pretty Boy is another and one reason why they're halfway home getting him.

He knows all about them. Everybody knows about them and everybody wants them to pause, look twice, and cough up a card that says, Yes, we see possibilities, please come to the following address during regular business hours on the next regular business day for regular further review. Everyone wants it but this Pretty Boy, who once got five cards in a night and tore them all up. But here he is, still a Pretty Boy. He thinks enough to know this is a failing in himself, that he likes being Pretty and chased and that is how they could end up getting him after all and that's b-b-b-bad. When he thinks about it, he thinks it with the

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stutter. B-b-b-bad. B-b-b-bad for him because he doesn't God help him want it, no, no, n-n-n-no. Which may make him the strangest Pretty Boy still live tonight and every night.

Still live and standing in the club where only the Prettiest Pretty Boys can get in any more. Pretty Girls are too easy, they've got to be better than Pretty and besides, Pretty Boys like to be Pretty all alone, no help thank you so much. This Pretty Boy doesn't mind Pretty Girls or any other kind of girls. Lately, though he has begun to wonder how much longer it will be for him. Two years? Possibly a little longer? By three it will be for def over and the Mohawk on the door will as soon spit in his face as leer in it.

If they don't get to him.

And if they *do* get to him, then it's never over and he can be wherever he chooses to be and wherever that is will be the center of the universe. They promise it, unlimited access in your free hours and endless hot season, endless youth. Pretty Boy Heaven, and to get there, they say, you don't even really have to die.

He looks up to the dj's roost, far above the bobbing, boogieing crowd on the dance floor. They still call them djs even though they aren't discs any more, they're chips and there's more than just sound on a lot of them. The great hyper-program, he's been told, the ultimate of ultimates, a short walk from there to the fourth dimension. He suspects this stuff comes from low-steppers shilling for them, hoping they'll get auditioned if they do a good enough shuck job. Nobody knows what it's really like except the ones who are there and you can't trust them, he figures. Because maybe they *aren't*, any more. Not really.

The dj sees his Pretty upturned face, recognizes him even though it's been awhile since he's come back here. Part of it was wanting to stay away from them and part of it was that the thug on the door might not let him in. And then, of course, he *had* to come, to see if he could get in, to see if anyone still wanted him. What was the point of Pretty if there was nobody to care and watch and pursue? Even now, he is almost sure he can feel the room rearranging itself around his presence in it and the dj confirms this is true by holding up a chip and pointing it to the left.

They are squatting on the make-believe stairs by the screen, reminding him of pigeons plotting to take over the world. He doesn't look too long, doesn't want to give them the idea he'd like to talk. But as he turns away, one, the younger man, starts to get up. The older man and the woman pull him back.

He pretends a big interest in the figures lining the nearest wall. Some are Pretty, some are female, some are undecided, some are very bizarre, or wealthy, or just charity cases. They all notice him and adjust themselves for his perusal.

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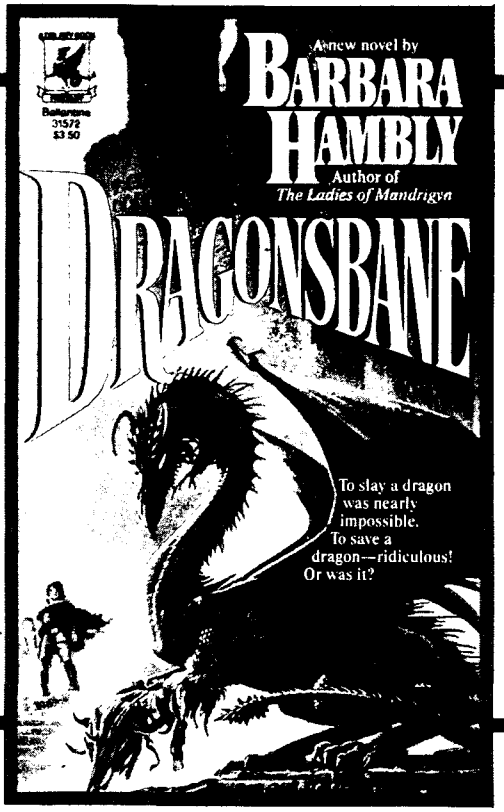

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Then one end of the room lights up with color and new noise. Bodies dance and stumble back from the screen where images are forming to rough music.

It's Bobby, he realizes.

A moment later, there's Bobby's face on the screen, sixteen feet high, even Prettier than he'd been when he was loose among the mortals. The sight of Bobby's Pretty-Pretty face fills him with anger and dismay and a feeling of loss so great he would strike anyone who spoke Bobby's name without his permission.

Bobby's lovely slate-grey eyes scan the room. They've told him senses are heightened after you make the change and go over but he's not so sure how that's supposed to work. Bobby looks kind of blind up there on the screen. A few people wave at Bobby—the dorks they let in so the rest can have someone to be hip in front of—but Bobby's eyes move slowly back and forth, back and forth, and then stop, looking right at him.

"Ah . . ." Bobby whispers it, long and drawn out. "Aaaaaahhhh."

He lifts his chin belligerently and stares back at Bobby.

"You don't have to die any more," Bobby says silkily. Music bounces under his words. "It's beautiful in here. The dreams can be as real as you want them to be. And if you want to be, you can be with me."

He knows the commercial is not aimed only at him but it doesn't matter. This is *Bobby*. Bobby's voice seems to be pouring over him, caressing him, and it feels too much like a taunt. The night before Bobby went over, he tried to talk him out of it, knowing it wouldn't work. If they'd actually refused him, Bobby would have killed himself, like Franco had.

But now Bobby would live forever and ever, if you believed what they said. The music comes up louder but Bobby's eyes are still on him. He sees Bobby mouth his name.

"Can you really see me, Bobby?" he says. His voice doesn't make it over the music but if Bobby's senses are so heightened, maybe he hears it anyway. If he does, he doesn't choose to answer. The music is a bumped up remix of a song Bobby used to party-till-he-puked to. The giant Bobby-face fades away to be replaced with a whole Bobby, somewhat larger than life, dancing better than the old Bobby ever could, whirling along changing scenes of streets, rooftops and beaches. The locales are nothing special but Bobby never did have all that much imagination, never wanted to go to Mars or even to the South Pole, always just to the hottest club. Always he liked being the exotic in plain surroundings and he still likes it. He always loved to get the looks. To be watched, worshipped, pursued. Yeah. He can see this is Bobby-heaven. The whole world will be giving him the looks now.

The background on the screen goes from street to the inside of a club;

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In the heart of the jungle lies
a secret that will set the world afire...

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this club, only larger, better, with an even hipper crowd, and Bobby shaking it with them. Half the real crowd is forgetting to dance now because they're watching Bobby, hoping he's put some of them into his video. Yeah, that's the dream, get yourself remixed in the extended dance version.

His own attention drifts to the fake stairs that don't lead anywhere. They're still perched on them, the only people who are watching *him* instead of Bobby. The woman, looking overaged in a purple plastic sac-suit, is fingering a card.

He looks up at Bobby again. Bobby is dancing in place and looking back at him, or so it seems. Bobby's lips move soundlessly but so precisely he can read the words: *This can be you. Never get old, never get tired, it's never last call, nothing happens unless you want it to and it could be you. You. You.* Bobby's hands point to him on the beat. *You. You. You.*

Bobby. Can you really see me?

Bobby suddenly breaks into laughter and turns away, shaking it some more.

He sees the Mohawk from the door pushing his way through the crowd, the real crowd, and he gets anxious. The Mohawk goes straight for the stairs, where they make room for him, rubbing the bristly red strip of hair running down the center of his head as though they were greeting a favored pet. The Mohawk looks as satisfied as a professional glutton after a foodrace victory. He wonders what they promised the Mohawk for letting him in. Maybe some kind of limited contract. Maybe even a try-out.

Now they are all watching him together. Defiantly, he touches a tall girl dancing nearby and joins her rhythm. She smiles down at him, moving between him and them purely by chance but it endears her to him anyway. She is wearing a flap of translucent rag over secondskins, like an old-time showgirl. Over six feet tall, not beautiful with that nose, not even pretty, but they let her in so she could be tall. She probably doesn't know that; she probably doesn't know anything that goes on and never really will. For that reason, he can forgive her the hard-tech orange hair.

A Rude Boy brushes against him in the course of a dervish turn, asking acknowledgement by ignoring him. Rude Boys haven't changed in more decades than anyone's kept track of, as though it were the same little group of leathered and chained troopers buggering their way down the years. The Rude Boy isn't dancing with anyone. Rude Boys never do. But this one could be handy, in case of an emergency.

The girl is dancing hard, smiling at him. He smiles back, moving slightly to her right, watching Bobby possibly watching him. He still can't tell if Bobby really sees anything. The scene behind Bobby is still

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a double of the club, getting hipper and hipper if that's possible. The music keeps snapping back to its first peak passage. Then Bobby gestures like God and he sees *himself*. He is dancing next to Bobby, Prettier than he ever could be, just the way they promise. Bobby doesn't look at the phantom but at him where he really is, lips moving again. *If you want to be, you can be with me. And so can she.*

His tall partner appears next to the phantom of himself. She is also much improved, though still not Pretty, or even pretty. The real girl turns and sees herself and there's no mistaking the delight in her face. Queen of the Hop for a minute or two. Then Bobby sends her image away so that it's just the two of them, two Pretty Boys dancing the night away, private party, stranger go find your own good time. How it used to be sometimes in real life, between just the two of them. He remembers hard.

"B-b-b-bobby!" he yells, the old stutter reappearing. Bobby's image seems to give a jump, as though he finally heard. He forgets everything, the girl, the Rude Boy, the Mohawk, them on the stairs, and plunges through the crowd toward the screen. People fall away from him as though they were re-enacting the Red Sea. He dives for the screen, for Bobby, not caring how it must look to anyone. What would they know about it, any of them. He can't remember in his whole sixteen years ever hearing one person say, *I love my friend*. Not Bobby, not even himself.

He fetches up against the screen like a slap and hangs there, face pressed to the glass. He can't see it now but on the screen Bobby would seem to be looking down at him. Bobby never stops dancing.

The Mohawk comes and peels him off. The others swarm up and take him away. The tall girl watches all this with the expression of a woman who lives upstairs from Cinderella and wears the same shoe size. She stares longingly at the screen. Bobby waves bye-bye and turns away.

"Of course, the process isn't reversible," says the older man. The steely hair has a careful blue tint; he has sense enough to stay out of hip clothes.

They have laid him out on a lounger with a tray of refreshments right by him. Probably slap his hand if he reaches for any, he thinks.

"Once you've distilled something to pure information, it just can't be reconstituted in a less efficient form," the woman explains, smiling. There's no warmth to her. *A less efficient form*. If that's what she really thinks, he knows he should be plenty scared of these people. Did she say things like that to Bobby? And did it make him even *more* eager?

"There may be no more exalted a form of existence than to live as sentient information," she goes on. "Though a lot more research must be done before we can offer conversion on a larger scale."

"Yeah?" he says. "Do they know that, Bobby and the rest?"

"Oh, there's nothing to worry about," says the younger man. He looks

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as though he's still getting over the pain of having outgrown his boogie shoes. "The system's quite perfected. What Grethe means is we want to research more applications for this new form of existence."

"Why not go over yourselves and do that, if it's so *exalted*."

"There are certain things that need to be done on this side," the woman says bitchily. "Just because—"

"Grethe." The older man shakes his head. She pats her slicked-back hair as though to soothe herself and moves away.

"We have other plans for Bobby when he gets tired of being featured in clubs," the older man says. "Even now, we're educating him, adding more data to his basic information configuration—"

"That would mean he ain't really *Bobby* any more, then, huh?"

The man laughs. "Of course he's Bobby. Do you change into someone else every time you learn something new?"

"Can you prove I *don't*?"

The man eyes him warily. "Look. You *saw* him. Was that Bobby?"

"I saw a video of Bobby dancing on a giant screen."

"That *is* Bobby and it will remain Bobby no matter what, whether he's poured into a video screen in a dot pattern or transmitted the length of the universe."

"That what you got in mind for him? Send a message to nowhere and the message is him?"

"We could. But we're not going to. We're introducing him to the concept of higher dimensions. The way he is now, he could possibly break out of the three-dimensional level of existence, pioneer a whole new plane of reality."

"Yeah? And how do you think you're gonna get Bobby to do *that*?"

"We convince him it's entertaining."

He laughs. "That's a good one. Yeah. Entertainment. You get to a higher level of existence and you'll open a club there that only the hippest can get into. It figures."

The older man's face gets hard. "That's what all you Pretty Boys are crazy for, isn't it? Entertainment?"

He looks around. The room must have been a dressing room or something back in the days when bands had been live. Somewhere overhead he can hear the faint noise of the club but he can't tell if Bobby's still on. "You call this entertainment?"

"I'm tired of this little prick," the woman chimes in. "He's thrown away opportunities other people would kill for—"

He makes a rude noise. "Yeah, we'd all kill to be someone's data chip. You think I really believe Bobby's real just because I can see him on a *screen?*"

The older man turns to the younger one. "Phone up and have them

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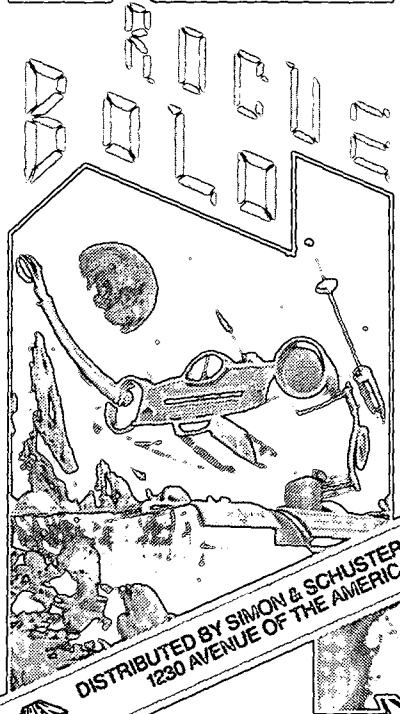

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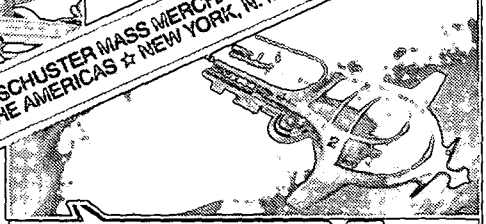

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pipe Bobby down here." Then he swings the lounger around so it faces a nice modern screen implanted in a shored-up cement-block wall.

"Bobby will join us shortly. Then he can tell you whether he's real or not himself. How will that be for you?"

He stares hard at the screen, ignoring the man, waiting for Bobby's image to appear. As though they really bothered to communicate regularly with Bobby this way. Feed in that kind of data and memory and Bobby'll believe it. He shifts uncomfortably, suddenly wondering how far he could get if he moved fast enough.

"My *boy*," says Bobby's sweet voice from the speaker on either side of the screen and he forces himself to keep looking as Bobby fades in, presenting himself on the same kind of lounger and looking mildly exerted, as though he's just come off the dance floor for real. "Saw you shakin' it upstairs awhile ago. You haven't been here for such a long time. What's the story?"

He opens his mouth but there's no sound. Bobby looks at him with boundless patience and indulgence. So Pretty, hair the perfect shade now and not a bit dry from the dyes and lighteners, skin flawless and shining like a healthy angel. Overnight angel, just like the old song.

"My *boy*," says Bobby. "Are you struck, like, shy or *dead?*"

He closes his mouth, takes one breath. "I don't like it, Bobby. I don't like it this way."

"Of course not, lover. You're the Watcher, not the Watchee, that's why. Get yourself picked up for a season or two and your disposition will *change*."

"You really like it, Bobby, being a blip on a chip?"

"Blip on a chip, your ass. I'm a universe now. I'm, like, *everything*. And, hey, dig—I'm on every channel." Bobby laughed. "I'm happy I'm sad!"

"S-A-D," comes in the older man. "Self-Aware Data."

"Ooo-eee," he says. "Too clever for me. Can I get out of here now?"

"What's your hurry?" Bobby pouts. "Just because I went over you don't love me any more?"

"You always were screwed up about that, Bobby. Do you know the difference between being loved and being watched?"

"Sophisticated boy," Bobby says. "So wise, so learned. So fully packed. On this side, there *is* no difference. Maybe there never was. If you love me, you watch me. If you don't look, you don't care and if you don't care I don't matter. If I don't matter, I don't exist. Right?"

He shakes his head.

"No, my boy, I *am* right." Bobby laughs. "You believe I'm right, because if you *didn't*, you wouldn't come shaking your Pretty Boy ass in a place

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like *this*, now, would you? You *like* to be watched, get seen. You see me, I see you. Life goes on."

He looks up at the older man, needing relief from Bobby's pure Prettiness. "How does he see me?"

"Sensors in the equipment. Technical stuff, nothing you care about."

He sighs. He should be upstairs or across town, shaking it with everyone else, living Pretty for as long as he could. Maybe in another few months, this way would begin to look good to him. By then they might be off Pretty Boys and looking for some other type and there he'd be, out in the cold-cold, sliding down the other side of his peak and no one would *want* him. Shut out of something going on that he might want to know about after all. Can he face it? He glances at the younger man. All grown up and no place to glow. Yeah, but can *he* face it?

He doesn't know. Used to be there wasn't much of a choice and now that there is, it only seems to make it worse. Bobby's image looks like it's studying him for some kind of sign, Pretty eyes bright, hopeful.

The older man leans down and speaks low into his ear. "We need to get you before you're twenty-five, before the brain stops growing. A mind taken from a still-growing brain will blossom and adapt. Some of Bobby's predecessors have made marvelous adaptation to their new medium. Pure video: there's a staff that does nothing all day but watch and interpret their symbols for breakthroughs in thought. And we'll be taking Pretty Boys for as long as they're publicly sought-after. It's the most efficient way to find the best performers, go for the ones everyone wants to see or be. The top of the trend is closest to heaven. And even if you never make a breakthrough, you'll still be entertainment. Not such a bad way to live for a Pretty Boy. Never have to age, to be sick, to lose touch. You spent most of your life young, why learn how to be old? Why learn how to live without all the things you have now—"

He puts his hands over his ears. The older man is still talking and Bobby is saying something and the younger man and the woman come over to try to do something about him. Refreshments are falling off the tray. He struggles out of the lounger and makes for the door.

"Hey, my *boy*," Bobby calls after him. "Gimme a minute here, gimme what the problem is."

He doesn't answer. What can you tell someone made of pure information anyway?

There's a new guy on the front door, bigger and meaner than His Mohawkness but he's only there to keep people out, not to keep anyone *in*. You want to jump ship, go to, you poor un-hip asshole. Even if you are a Pretty Boy. He reads it in the guy's face as he passes from noise into the three A.M. quiet of the street.

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They let him go. He doesn't fool himself about that part. They *let* him out of the room because they know all about him. They know he lives like Bobby lived, they know he loves what Bobby loved—the clubs, the admiration, the lust of strangers for his personal magic. He can't say he doesn't love that, because he *does*. He isn't even sure if he loves it more than he ever loved Bobby, or if he loves it more than being alive. Than being live.

And here it is, three A.M., clubbing prime time, and he is moving toward home. Maybe he *is* a poor un-hip asshole after all, no matter what he loves. Too stupid even to stay in the club, let alone grab a ride to heaven. Still he keeps moving, unbothered by the chill but feeling it. Bobby doesn't have to go home in the cold any more, he thinks. Bobby doesn't even have to get through the hours between club-times if he doesn't want to. All times are now prime time for Bobby. Even if he gets unplugged, he'll never know the difference. Poof, it's a day later, poof, it's a year later, poof, you're out for good. Painlessly.

Maybe Bobby has the right idea, he thinks, moving along the empty sidewalk. If he goes over tomorrow, who will notice? Like when he left the dance floor—people will come and fill up the space. Ultimately, it wouldn't make any difference to anyone.

He smiles suddenly. Except *them*. As long as they don't have him, he makes a difference. As long as he has flesh to shake and flaunt and feel with, he makes a pretty goddamn big difference to *them*. Even after they don't want him any more, he will still be the one they didn't get. He rubs his hands together against the chill, feeling the skin rubbing skin, really *feeling* it for the first time in a long time, and he thinks about sixteen million things all at once, maybe one thing for every brain cell he's using, or maybe one thing for every brain cell yet to come.

He keeps moving, holding to the big thought, making a difference, and all the little things they won't be making a program out of. He's light-headed with joy—he doesn't know what's going to happen.

Neither do they. ●

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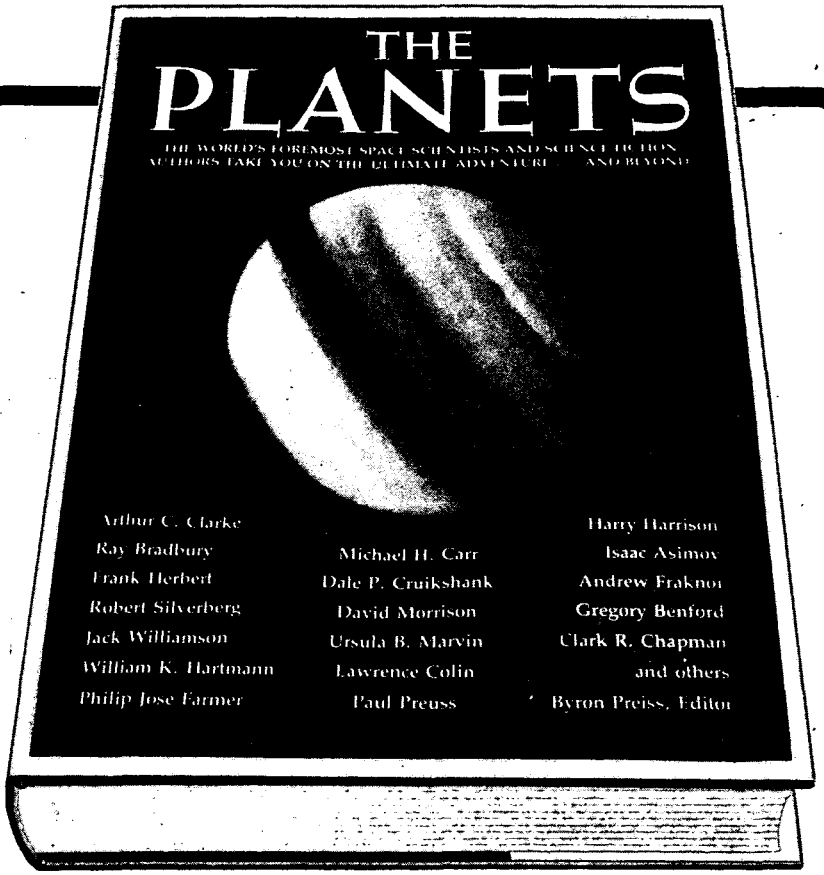

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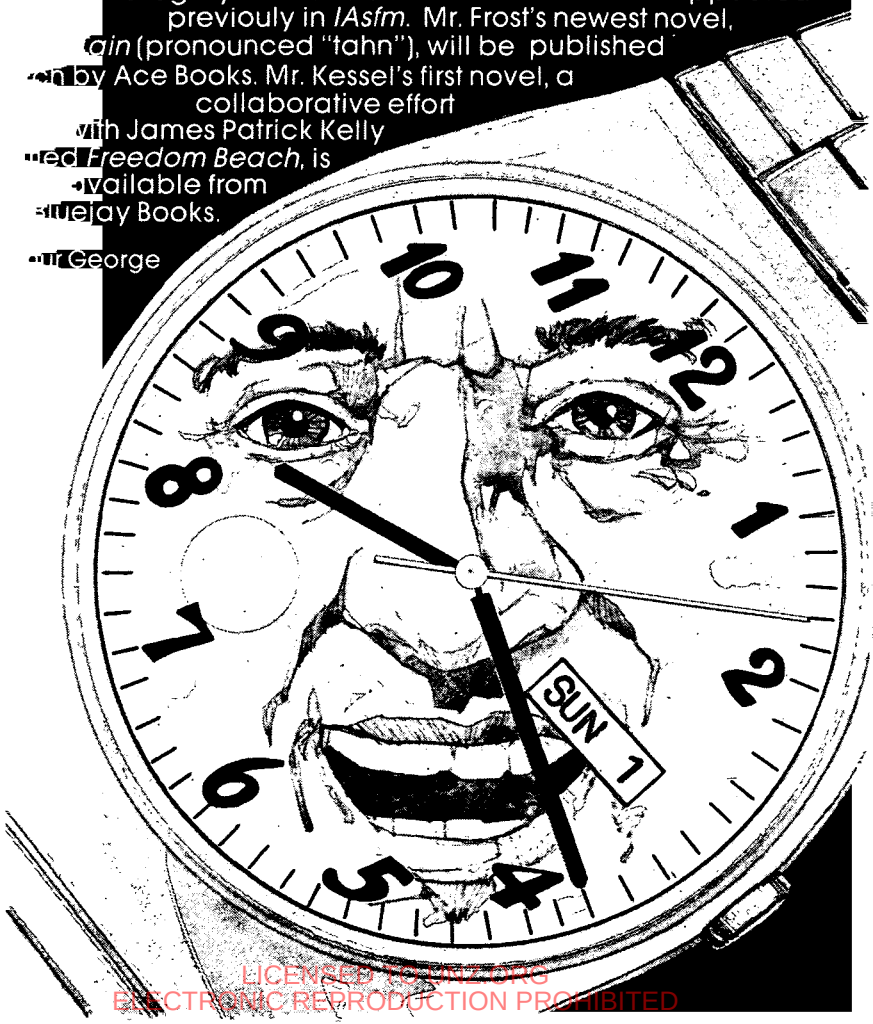

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"Where the hell is it?" Alan Mathews began shoving glasses aside in the cupboard. They pinged and threatened to break.

"God, will you quit?" Sarah said.

"*You* quit, Sarah!" he snarled. Out of the corner of his eye he saw her draw back and realized instinctively that that was not what he wanted; he wanted her actively participating in stirring his anger. He turned toward her. "I suppose you think I'm wrong. You want to take a look? Here—" He grabbed a kitchen chair and slammed it against the cabinet. "Climb up and look in there and tell me the mug's there. Go ahead." He stepped back.

Sarah looked at him across the kitchen table. "No."

"Come on. If you find it, then I'll shut up, I'll admit I'm stupid. Anything. Okay? Just take a look."

"Alan, this is dumb," Sarah said. She looked afraid. Alan could not imagine what she had to be afraid of. When he continued to stand there, she finally got up and eased around the round, wire-legged table, which rocked slightly on the two legs that never touched the floor at the same time. She climbed onto the chair and began moving the cups and tumblers out of the way, peering into the cupboard for her husband's coffee mug. Alan realized it could easily have been pushed behind the Cheerios or the Instant Breakfast in the next section. He hoped she would not find it, then immediately felt bad for thinking that.

While she looked, Sarah talked to him. "Look, you've got a right to be upset, because of the job and all. Anybody would be if they got laid off."

"Fired. I got fired."

"They gave you two months' severance pay, Alan."

He stared at her calves and said nothing. He was out of a job: that was the bottom line. He knew a lot about bottom lines. For six years he had been *the* accountant at Shawn and Zemanski, the best at keeping track of other people's property so they would not have to keep track of it themselves. He still could not figure out why, when the crunch came and they started looking for things to toss overboard, he had been one of them. He had been the best at his job, immaculate, everything in place, everything accounted for. And they had fired him, and now he could not hold onto anything, not even his damned coffee cup. "It's always in there," he said. "I always put it right there." He leaned in and slapped the edge of the cupboard. Sarah jumped.

Her calm stare made him hear the accusation in his own voice—since *he* would not have deviated from his routine, then *she* must have screwed up. She looked down at him in his terrycloth robe, unshaven, his hair a tangle. At that moment he knew he had become everything she disliked. Sarah got off the chair and walked out of the kitchen.

"My mug," he called after her.

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"Find it yourself—*I* have to get ready for work," she yelled back.

That stung as hard as if she had slapped him. Slowly, he straddled the chair, sat down, and lowered his head until his chin rested on its back. He was eye-level with the kitchen counter, staring across it at the sugar bowl. His whole life seemed a ruin, as if a tornado had touched down in the center of it. He glanced at his watch, the one Sarah had given him on their fifth wedding anniversary: 8:12. What now?

Sarah came back into the kitchen ten minutes later, dressed for success. She seemed to have calmed down. "Did you look in the dishwasher?" she asked.

He had unloaded it himself the previous afternoon. "Of course," he said.

She looked at him, then reached out and pulled down the dishwasher door. His coffee mug swung from the rack, the only item in the whole machine.

Sarah went to work. Alan stayed in his pajamas and robe. He walked around the house in idle frustration, finally sat down in the living room and discovered the wonders of daytime television, a celebration of greed and interpersonal disaster that distracted him for two hours. Later, over lunch, he read the paper, studying the want-ads. He found two possibilities, but he had no résumé to send, and the thought of composing one exhausted him. The more he thought about work, the more weight he seemed to take on. Maybe after a few days of sitting with nothing to do he would yearn to go out and interview. Until then, Alan decided, he would keep himself busy with simple things.

The kitchen—it would do him good to straighten out the kitchen. Sarah's dishes were on the table, her crumbs beside the toaster; she had spilled jam on the countertop and left her coffee spoon lying beside the range, where it made a sticky brown stain. Alan rinsed and racked the plates in the dishwasher, put the flatware in the basket. He added the spatula and a coffee cup. He could not find his mug. He thought he might have taken it into the living room, but it was not beside the chair in front of the TV. He strode back to the kitchen and grabbed the pan the eggs had been fried in, but the scrubber was missing. Annoyed, he filled the pan with hot water and left it to soak. With the machine loaded, he searched under the sink for the dishwasher soap. He had seen Sarah use the box a hundred times, even knew what it looked like: it was electric blue and white. He could close his eyes and visualize it. But the box was not there.

He squatted down in front of the sink and began pulling junk out from beneath it. At first he did this calmly, but his anger began to swell as the box did not appear. He threw a tin of shoe polish across the room,

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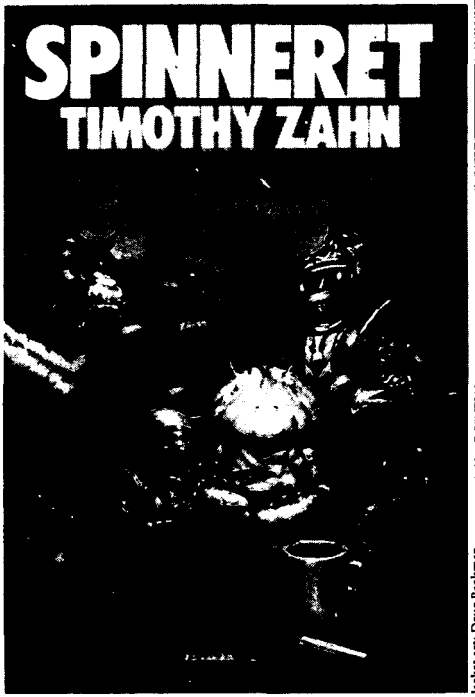

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tossed rags, slammed down a cleanser container so hard that it spilled green crystals like pollen over the floor. Sarah had let them run out of soap, so now he could not even do housework. Alan stood up, snatched the bottle of dishwashing liquid from the counter, and squirted it around the inside of the machine. He slammed the door and cranked the knob. The machine thumped as it started up. He nearly gave it a good kick as well, but stopped himself, stepped around the mess in the middle of the floor and padded into the living room.

He stared at the TV, but the missing dish soap would not let him be. After a few minutes he got up again and went back into the kitchen. He pulled the tall kitchen trashbasket out of the broomcloset and picked through the layers of used aluminum foil, banana peels, tin cans and egg shells. Coffee grounds coated his arm like sprinkles on an ice cream cone. He found nothing. Unless Sarah had hidden the empty box, they had not had any dishwasher soap in over a week. And that simply could not be true.

By the time Sarah came home, his mood had improved. He had put away all the stuff on the kitchen floor and wiped up the cleanser. Sarah made no comment on the morning's argument and seemed genuinely glad to see him. He hugged her, but even as he did, he realized that he had forgotten to thaw something out for dinner. "I did the dishes, though," he said, as much to himself as to her.

"Oh, that was nice," she said. She opened the machine, then after a moment began to laugh. "Alan, you silly fool, you have to put soap in when you wash them."

Even from across the room he could see that they had not gotten clean. He could feel it coming; he tried not to let any accusation ring in his voice. "There wasn't any soap."

"What do you mean? There's a whole box."

"No there isn't."

Sarah opened the door under the sink and pulled out a tall box. Electric blue and white.

"But I looked," he said.

Before he could explain just how thoroughly he had looked, she said, "You must have missed it, then." There was sympathy in her voice, maybe even pity, and he resented her all the more for that. But she had the box, and he refused to start another fight. That was all they did anymore. Not now, not tonight; he had had enough.

"You got me, Sarah." He clutched at his heart and staggered like Edward G. Robinson at the end of *Little Caesar*. "My housekeeping sucks and everything's frozen. Let's go out to eat." That charmed her: he had always been able to charm her. She smiled. Alan went to the bedroom,

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got out of the damned bathrobe, shaved, and combed his hair. Feeling better about himself, he went to the dresser and opened the top drawer, where he kept his keys. And they weren't there. He shoved his hand through his neatly folded underwear.

Sarah stood in the doorway with her coat on.

"I can't find my keys."

"Well, you haven't gone out in days. What about the suit you were wearing . . . you know, last week?"

"Yeah, maybe." She was trying to help, he could see that. The pockets of the navy-blue suit turned up nothing but lint. Alan sat down on the edge of the bed and tried to recall what he had done with the keys, but he could not. God, he hated this. Ever since the lay-off he had been so preoccupied that he put things down without thinking and then, later, could not remember where they were. Even things he had a designated place for were vanishing, all because he was not thinking about them when he set them down.

"Don't worry about it," Sarah said. She sat beside him and stroked his hair. "You can use mine. Here." She took her keys from her purse and placed them in his hand. He glowered at the purse—it was in a constant state of chaos, but somehow Sarah always found what she wanted in it. *He* was the one who was losing his focus. If he hadn't been wearing a watch, he would not even have known what time it was.

Alan drove to the restaurant. Whenever they went anywhere, Alan drove—it was an assumption which neither of them had ever questioned. He held the wheel tightly, as if it might evaporate at any moment. "Half my week has been spent looking for keys and soap," he said. "I hate it. I hate forgetting."

"Forgetfulness isn't always bad," Sarah said wistfully. "Sometimes I wish I could forget the things that bug me."

"That's easy for you to say. You're not losing your marbles."

She smiled at his irascibility. Losing things became the topic of conversation all the way to the restaurant. Sarah suggested that the more cluttered people's lives got, the more they lost. "You just reach a point when you've got too much to pay attention to," she said, and squeezed his arm as if to show him that she understood and did not resent his absentmindedness. Of course it was hard for him, she said. He had always been in control before.

While Sarah was at work the next day, Alan went through the paper again and circled a few job listings. He made some calls, and got an interview for the following afternoon. Around noon he remembered that he was supposed to cook dinner. He took a pound of hamburger from the freezer and put it on the counter to thaw. For awhile he played with the

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crossword puzzle in the paper. The mail came and he took his new copy of *Time* and went in to the bedroom, lay down and read some of it, and finally fell asleep.

Sarah woke him when she came in. He got up and hurried into the kitchen to start dinner. The hamburger was not there. He checked in the refrigerator, then the freezer. There was no trace of it. Not even a puddle of water on the counter. He yelled for Sarah and she came running in, wearing her slip.

"Where's the meat I thawed out?" he demanded.

Sarah looked at him blankly.

"Hey, it didn't just hop off the counter and roll out the door. What did you do with it?"

"Nothing," she insisted, unable to hide her amusement.

His jaw got tight. "You cut it out."

"Alan, I didn't do anything with your hamburger. I didn't even *see* it."

"Okay," he said stiffly. "Fine. You can fix dinner." He strode back through the house, slammed his hand against the wall as he went along the hallway into the bedroom. She came in a minute later and finished changing her clothes. He watched her at the closet, but neither of them said a word. Afterwards, she made sandwiches and soup.

They ate without speaking to each other, sitting apart behind folding oak trays in front of the TV. Alan stared at the screen, watching the news, retaining none of it. The silence between them gnawed at him. Sarah got up, taking the dishes with her. He wanted to turn around, to call her back, to tell her about his interview—just to show her he had not wasted his time all day.

The phone rang. Instinctively, he turned to answer it, then realized as he did that no phone sat there. It was ringing in the kitchen. Staring at the place on the end table where the phone had always been, Alan listened to Sarah's voice, so distant and indecipherable. In a while, her dark form appeared in the kitchen doorway.

"That was Bob and Cindy," she said. He could hear her tension but he could not make himself look away from the end table. Guardedly, Sarah went on, "They want to know if we can come to Richard's birthday party next Saturday—they're throwing one for him."

"What happened to the phone in here?"

"What?"

"I said, what happened to the phone that used to sit right here?" He placed his hand on the table.

"Alan, are you okay?"

"Just answer the damn question."

She came over and sat on the table, taking his hand between hers. "Alan, we've never had a phone in this room. Don't you remember? We

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put one in the kitchen and one in the bedroom. The Bell lady tried like hell to sell you a third phone. You practically threatened to sue if she mentioned it one more time. Remember? Look at me, come *on*."

He watched her eyes search each of his, look over his face. He felt very cold. He forced a smile. "Yeah, sure. I'm sorry. I guess I must have fallen asleep for a minute watching TV."

"All right." She sighed, then was silent for a moment. "You want to go to bed?"

"I guess so." He turned around, pulling free of her grasp, and switched off the TV. "By the way," he said, "I got an interview for tomorrow afternoon with Marine Midland."

She was there, beside him, hugging him. "That's wonderful. Why didn't you tell me sooner?"

"Well, I—I wanted to surprise you. I wasn't going to say anything at all until afterwards, but I have to have your spare key to my car."

"I'll leave it for you on the kitchen table in the morning."

Alan nodded. He closed his eyes for a minute, picturing the key, envisioning it on the kitchen table. They went to bed and made love, slowly, languorously. At least he still remembered how to do that.

Getting ready for the interview the next morning, Alan could not locate his toothbrush or his comb. He used Sarah's. His suit was still in the closet, but the dark blue tie was missing. He chose the black tie. When he failed to find the shoes he wanted, he settled on his loafers. All through his preparations, he thought of only one thing: the key.

He did not dare go into the kitchen before he was dressed. He had to steel himself to walk in, his fear an almost solid wall between him and the room.

The key lay in the middle of the table. Beneath it was a note that said, "Good luck. Don't forget I love you."

He took the key and gripped it in his hand hard enough to imprint its edges on his palm. Feeling saved, he went out.

"How did it go?" Sarah asked him over the dinner that she had chosen and cooked.

"All right, I guess." He shrugged. "I'd be stuck in a department with six other accountants, doing donkey work. They said they'd let me know in a couple of weeks."

"That's great."

"Well, it's not something to count on."

"I know. You should look for some other jobs, but at least it's a beginning."

"Yeah, a beginning." Alan stared at his round steak and rice, unable

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to meet her gaze, any more than he could tell her the truth about the interview—that he had been unable to locate the address he had written down and that, after racing home to check the paper, he had been unable to find either of the ads he had circled. The columns of want ads were pristine in their gray indifference. That had shaken him, scared him into action. He had searched through the phone book for the Marine Midland address, determined to go down there and hunt around until he found somebody who would talk to him about a job, whether they had advertised one or not.

Then things had gotten much worse. The second time out in the car the city seemed strange. Buildings he remembered from the daily drive to work no longer existed. Street names seemed to have changed. He gave up on the interview and fled. He got lost twice in his attempt to get back home and had reached the point of panic, thinking that he might never find his way, when, by sheer accident, he found the street and screeched into the driveway. Safe, home was safe. But when he had opened the front door, the disorientation grew.

The interior of the house was somehow altered. Though he could not recall the missing items, Alan knew there was less furniture. He knew enough not to ask Sarah about these things. He knew what she would say: that everything had always been exactly the way it was now.

The rest of the evening he remained grimly silent as he contemplated his own madness. Let her think it was because he had not been hired on the spot. He didn't even remember where the spot was.

When he awoke the next morning, she had already left. He looked around the bedroom, itemizing what he saw, comparing it to what he thought should be there. With dreamlike certainty he realized that the only way to hold onto reality anymore was to hold it in his mind. What had disappeared up to now were things he quit paying attention to. He checked the whole bedroom to his satisfaction before throwing back the covers.

His pajamas were gone. He lay naked on the bed. There was no point in looking for them; he knew they had disappeared. Even as he thought about this, he realized he had stopped concentrating on the house. Quickly, he got up and went to the door of the bedroom. He opened it cautiously. The hallway was still there. He stepped out—onto a wooden floor. The hall carpet had vanished. The living room carpet, too. Now the floors were hardwood.

He noted the things that still remained: TV, couch, lamps. He went into the kitchen. Everything seemed normal. He opened a cupboard. It was bare. There were not even any shelves. He opened the next one—also empty. Now there was just the refrigerator, and he created a mental

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picture of it and everything inside it before opening the door. The refrigerator was stocked just as he had pictured. However, when he turned away, he found the kitchen table had disappeared. From somewhere he heard a keening whine and listened in terror for several seconds before he realized it was coming from his own throat. He took a carton of orange juice from the refrigerator and backed slowly out into the living room.

The curtains were gone from the windows. He stood naked in front of them, squinting at the bright light, trying to shade his eyes with the orange juice container. Why was it so bright? Was the sun reflecting off his car? He moved his head, trying to escape the glare, but it remained. There seemed to be nothing outside the window except that light. He could see none of the other houses on the block.

He retreated to the hallway outside the bedroom, fear driving his heart like an engine. He shuddered and rested his head against the door, feeling like an animal in a trap. Hastily, he tried to remember what should be in the room. He opened the door. Everything was as it should be. Still his heart raced.

He went to the closet and threw back the doors. His clothes hung on racks there. He almost cried in relief. He clutched the sleeve of a suit coat, rubbed his fingers against the rough wool, pressed it against his bristled cheek. Even as he did so, he sensed a change in the room. He swung about. The bed had vanished.

He groaned; his legs felt weak. Somehow he knew if he left the room again, he would find the rest of the house empty, maybe gone entirely. But Sarah! What would happen when she came home? Maybe her presence would bring it all back. She couldn't very well say they had never had food or curtains or a front yard. God, he needed her now. Maybe she would come home early. How long? He turned to the nightstand, but the clock radio had been erased, and the bedside phone. This, whatever it was—how could it be so selective?

"Cluttered lives," he said aloud. That was what Sarah had said. How much could you keep inside your head at any given moment? How much could he watch?

In the corner he found a point from which he could see everything in the room. All he had to do was watch it until Sarah got home. He made a mental picture of her—he had to keep her, too! His watch, he suddenly realized, he still had his watch. He touched it, warm on his wrist, still marking the time with quartz precision. Hours. He would have to wait hours and hours. He slipped off the watch and set it in front of him on the floor, where it would be in plain sight all the time.

Fear had made him thirsty. He reached for the orange juice beside him. It was gone. He stared down at the floor, feeling betrayed. Movement made him glance up at the closet, but there had been no movement; it

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had been another restructuring of his world. The clothing had vanished from the closet while he'd been losing the orange juice. He cried out in anguish and crawled over to the closet. Viciously, he swiped at the door, banging it closed. One less thing to worry about.

"One less," he said.

He scrambled back to the corner, knocking over his watch, and put it upright again so he could watch the pulses of time. If he could just find a way to hold onto time; yes, that was it. He was losing time, pieces of his life breaking off like chunks off an iceberg, drifting off in *time*. The pulses of the watch became everything, the whole world. If he could watch time pass, he thought, then nothing more could escape.

Staring at the watch, he tried hard not even to blink. His eyes watered. He swiped at the tears, but did not lose sight of the watch. Slowly, he became aware of the brightness. Light seemed to spill from under the door, to seep around its edges as well. He watched it, at the margin of his vision, creeping like sunlight across the floor. It spread out from around the edges of the closet door as well. The light erased the depths of shadows, the joints and angles of the room that he would not look at directly. Painted walls became eternities. They went on and on and on, fading away into emptiness and silence.

At five-fifteen Sarah got home. The day had been a monster: she tried to make it go away. Life would be easier if forgetfulness were easy. Dr. Scrim would call that an antisocial thought; she would be happy to forget him for a few hours, too. She went into the kitchen, dropped her blazer over one of the chairs, then turned to the refrigerator and took out the makings of a salad for dinner. Tonight she did not feel like cooking.

She stopped still and listened, thinking that she heard a noise from the back of the house. Yes, yes, there was a noise—a soft beeping. She set down the head of lettuce and went down the hall, her shoes clacking on the polished oak. The noise came from the bedroom. She opened the door.

Everything in the room seemed just as she had left it in the morning . . . except for the small beeping object in the middle of the bed. Sarah went over and picked it up. It was a handsome gold watch, digital, studded with pins and functions. She found the one that controlled the alarm. The watch fell silent. On its back was an inscription: *To Alan, myDearest, from Sarah.*

Sarah sat down slowly on the bed. "Alan," she said softly, almost sadly. "Alan." She looked up at the bedroom window where the bright sunlight spilled in around the curtains. She said, "Who the hell is Alan?" ●

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by Tim Sullivan

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Tim Sullivan sold his first story in 1977. Since then he has been published in most of the leading science fiction and fantasy magazines, as well as in several anthologies, and he was a finalist for the Nebula award in 1982. Mr. Sullivan has also published two novels based on the NBC TV series "V"— *V: The Florida Project* and *V: The New England Resistance*. A third V novel is due soon from Pinnacle Books, *V: The British Invasion*.

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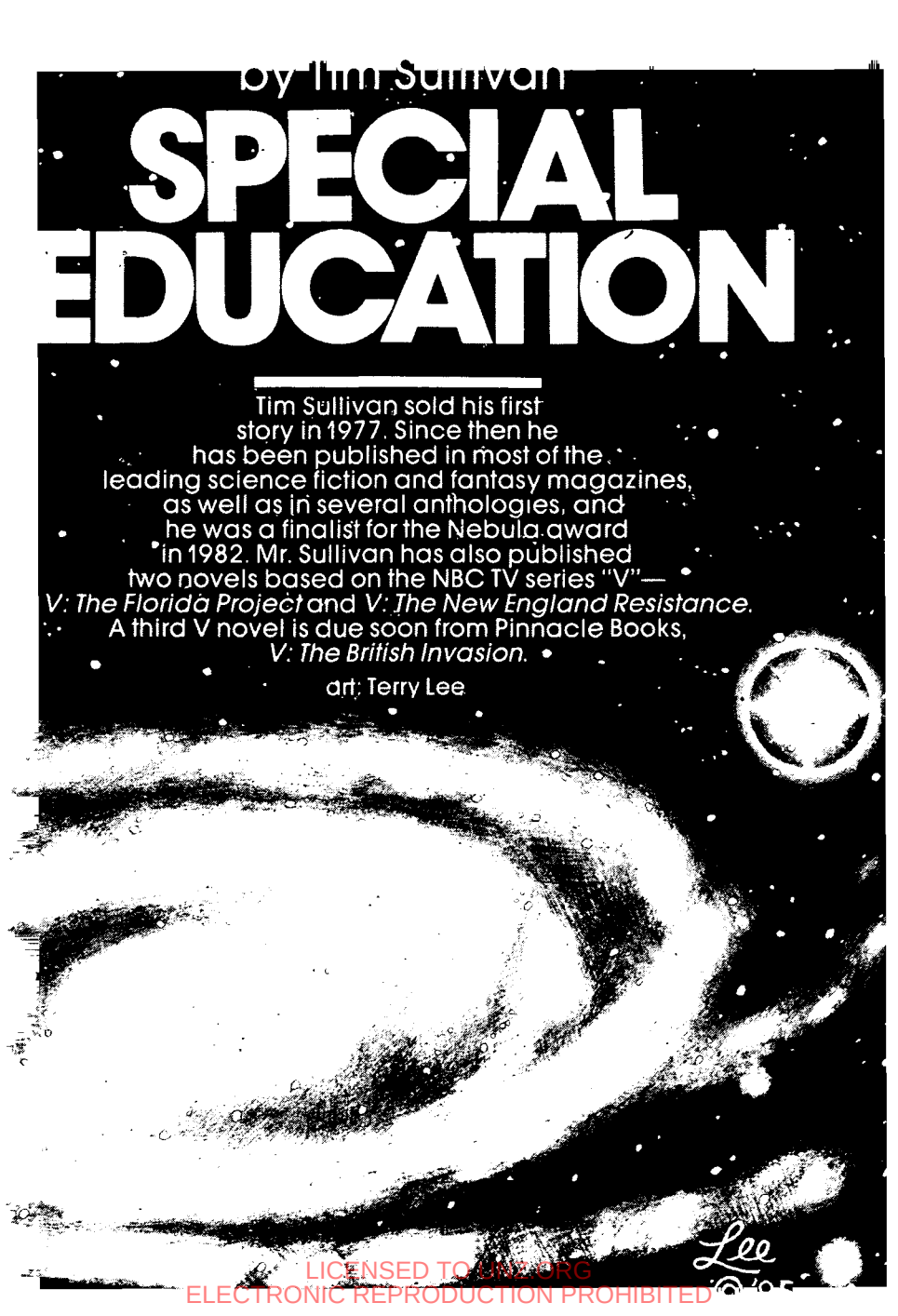

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They won't let me work at the residence anymore. I admit I was fed up with the place, but leaving wasn't my idea. In fact, I was doing fine, one of the best counselors the program had, when James came to live with us.

"James, meet Donald," Ethel said, introducing us in the living room. "Donald will be staying here tonight."

Ethel was a handsome, slender woman with short, dark hair, who spoke glibly to residents and counselors alike. She was in charge of our city-wide program for the mentally retarded, and she had just brought James Towers from the state hospital to our Todd Street house. James, who had been living in institutions for twenty-five of his forty years, extended a limp hand.

"Pleased to meet you, James," I said. "I think you're going to like it here." It was a pretty safe bet. Unlike the hospital, our place provided the residents with as much freedom as possible. Of course, a counselor was usually on hand, but James would take care of himself. In a week or two, he would even start at a county-sponsored job. This was a big step for him.

"Hello," he said. He looked at me shyly with bright blue eyes, and I could swear he wasn't retarded as he sized me up. His clothes and his awkwardness said otherwise, though.

"Ginny will show you your room, James," Ethel said.

Ginny was a tiny woman, a ringer for Mammy Yokum, who'd been with us for two years. She was among our best adjusted residents, always helpful—though she had a temper—and was frequently entrusted with extra duties. She led James upstairs, the two of them shuffling along the corridor for a minute or two.

Ethel stood by the picture window, the late afternoon sun illuminating faint lines in her face subtly. "James is a special case," she said. "There's a dynamic here that's a little unusual."

In spite of the hokey psychologese, I sensed that Ethel was trying to express something that had been gnawing at her awhile. I waited to see if she would cut through the bullshit.

"James has a rather serious emotional problem."

Didn't they all. Spend a lifetime feeling inferior, people looking at you like you just crawled out of a toilet bowl, and you'd have problems, too. But that wasn't the way Ethel looked at it. "What is it?" I asked.

"Multiple personality." She looked out at the middle class houses with their manicured lawns and lit a cigarette.

"Isn't that a trifle unusual for one of these halfway houses?"

She sighed. "He also has seizures, but he has medication for that."

"Why did they send us a multiple personality case? These people are supposed to be functioning socially."

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"Oh, James can function just fine . . . but he has this imaginary friend."

"Only one, I hope."

"Yes, only one. A fairly recent development. His doctors thought it would aggravate things if he stayed in the hospital, so here he is."

The front door opened, and in walked Bessie, Harold, and Bud, stamping the dirt off their feet. They were just home from work, all three of them in good spirits.

"Hello, everybody," Ethel said. I swear she didn't know their names. "Your new housemate is moving in today. His name is James, and Ginny's helping him get settled in his room right now."

The three of them murmured understanding, and I restrained myself from mentioning that they were actually getting two new housemates for the price of one.

"It's all yours," Ethel said to me as the residents went off to their rooms or to their chores. "Call me if you have any problems with James."

"Right."

She had her coat on and was out the door by the time I had that single word out of my mouth. I stared at the peeling white paint on the back of the door for a few seconds after it shut. And then I felt the unmistakable sensation of somebody watching me. I turned, and there was James staring at me from the top of the stairs. Strange that I hadn't heard him, I thought, what with the rickety old floors in this house.

"Would you like to come downstairs, James?" I asked. "I'll show you the rest of the house."

James nodded gravely and carefully negotiated the stairs. I watched him shamble towards me, a sedentary-looking, middle aged man with badly cut straw hair. You'd have known at once that he was mentally retarded if you'd passed him on the street, except for the clarity of his blue eyes.

He came and stood near me, looking at his shoes. I held a folder containing his hospital records, which Ethel had just given me. Perhaps I would know where we stood once I had read them.

"Well," I said, "the kitchen's in here."

I heard Harold's stereo go on just as we entered the kitchen. Harold liked to listen to country & western music while he did his chores. I've always hated c & w, but I put up with it because it seemed to make his work easier for him.

After we toured the kitchen and the dining room, I took James down to the next level, where the office and counselor's sleeping quarters and bathroom were located. It was a twenty-five year old split-level house, and the east wing was convenient for our purposes, more or less off limits to the residents. The pantry was there, too, an alcove with two plyboard

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doors secured by a simple combination lock, the kind kids use on their bicycle chains. James was more interested in the pantry than in my office. The refrigerator in the kitchen only held fruits and vegetables, while all the goodies were locked away down here.

"If you should ever want to talk to me about anything," I said as James stared at the lock, "don't hesitate to come down to the office."

"Yes," he said, turning away from the pantry. "Go upstairs now?"

"Well, I suppose you can see the basement some other time. Go ahead." And, as he made his painful way up the stairs, I opened the file and read the clinical reports about poor James Towers. His prescription included dilantin and, on occasion, chlorpromazine. That last is a heavy-duty sedative. I loved the offhand way Ethel dismissed his seizures . . . *but he has medication for that.*

A few days later, I went upstairs to see how the residents were getting along with dinner preparation. I tried to help with such domestic chores as seldom as possible, assisting only when it appeared that the residents' culinary efforts would result in something inedible.

"How you doing, Bess?" I said as I entered the kitchen.

"Fine," she said, "but I have to get noodles out of the pantry."

"I'll get the noodles," I said, seeing that Bess had all she could handle with the salad and boiling water. I went down to the pantry and opened the combination lock. Flipping on the light, I looked on the shelves until I found a box of noodles. I grabbed the box, and just before I turned out the light I noticed something. The peanut butter was gone.

I double-checked the shelves to make sure I hadn't misplaced it, but it was definitely gone. That meant that one of the residents had slipped in behind my back while the pantry was unlocked and stolen the peanut butter. But come to think of it, that was impossible; I was positive the peanut butter was there when the residents had made their breakfasts. It had been locked up all day. The solution, however farfetched, was that one of the residents had figured out the combination.

Ginny was helping Bess cook, so I handed her the box of noodles. Harold and Bud were in the living room. Only James was upstairs. I went to his room and tapped on the door.

"Come in," James said.

I entered to find him sitting on his bed, facing the wall.

"James," I said, "the peanut butter is missing. Do you know where it is?"

James turned slowly towards me. At that moment, I realized that I must have been wrong before. The clarity I had noticed in James' eyes just wasn't there. I saw only the dimmest spark of intelligence. This man

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could not have figured out the combination on the pantry lock, I was certain of it.

"I know," he said.

"You do? Where is it?" Surprise.

He stood and went to the closet. There was the gleaming jar of peanut butter among the linens. I removed it, speaking to James sternly: "James, it's against the rules to steal. You'll have to go without something because you took this."

"I didn't take," James protested, looking very hurt. "Friend take."

What was I to say to that? The temptation was to scold him, but if his alter ego stole the peanut butter, James was truly not to blame. James had been here four days now, and this was the first time he'd mentioned his friend. I was fascinated, the stealing incident fading into insignificance as I asked him, "Where is your friend now, James?"

Without hesitation, James lifted his right hand and pointed his index finger towards his head.

"You're pointing at yourself," I said.

"Friend in head." He thrust his finger at his temple emphatically.

So he knew about the other personality. Well, that wasn't unheard of; many multiple personality cases were aware of the others inside them. Sometimes one knew and the other didn't. Indeed, the key to stability is integrating the separate personalities. Since James knew about his friend, we had a good chance of making progress. Doubtless, the best thing to do now was find out as much as I could.

"James," I said, "does your friend have a name?"

He looked everywhere but at me, and his fingers tugged nervously at the bedcovers. "Yes," he finally said.

"Well, what is it?"

He looked down at the floor.

"What is your friend's name?" I repeated.

For a moment, I didn't think he would tell me, and then he suddenly spat it out: "James."

"James? You mean he has the same name as you?"

He nodded slowly. Did he realize that he and James were both the same?

"How did your friend happen to take the peanut butter?" I asked. "Did you want him to?"

"Yes."

"And he showed you how to open the lock?"

"Yes."

"Then he didn't really steal it, did he? He just helped you do it."

"Yes." James looked as though he would cry.

"All right, James, it's not the worst crime that's ever been committed,"

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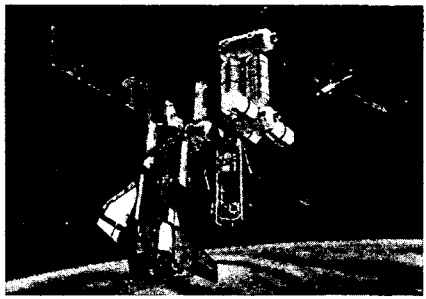

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I said. "I'm glad you admitted that you stole the peanut butter. Don't you feel better, now that you've told the truth?"

"Yes."

"Okay." I left him, calling behind me, "Dinner will be ready soon, James. Don't forget to wash your hands."

I went back downstairs to help with dinner, wondering how James could share his body with a personality clever enough to open that combination lock. The records showed that he had suffered brain damage as an infant, and there was no mention of anything like this while he was at the hospital, so far as I could tell. I'd have to discuss this with the boss.

"I didn't come over here this afternoon to hear your wild theories about James. You're not his analyst, his therapist, or his doctor. You're just his counselor. Let's leave it at that, shall we?" Ethel stalked from one end of the office to the other, waving her cigarette from time to time to emphasize a point. "Shall we, Donald?"

"Of course." What choice did I have. If I didn't toe the line I could lose my job. I resented the implied threat.

"What you must do with James," she went on, "is help get him accustomed to the house rules, help him to adjust to life outside the institution. I don't think you'll do much for him by indulging him in his fantasies."

"The fact that he opened that lock is no fantasy," I said.

She stopped pacing and glared at me. "Okay, it's remarkable, but it doesn't mean a hell of a lot."

I disagreed, but I managed to keep my mouth shut about it while she reminded me of just how unimportant I was, and how she had done everything to help me work my way up on the program staff despite my intransigence, and on and on. I pretended to listen for the sake of my pocketbook.

"Don, I want you to do something for me," she said at the end of her lecture.

"What?"

"I want you to spend the night again."

"Again? For Christ's sake, Ethel, I've spent every night since James arrived. Tonight will be five nights in a row."

"You'll be paid for it."

"That's not the point. I need to get out of this place from time to time. There's such a thing as a social life, you know."

"What social life?"

She had me there. Since my divorce three years before, I'd been on perhaps half a dozen dates, maybe even fewer. Still, she didn't have to rub it in. "I've got no social life because I spend all my time here," I said.

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"Just tonight, Don. All right?"

"All right," I said, sulking.

She picked up her umbrella. "Walk me to the door," she said.

We went upstairs and she left. The residents were all at work—except for James, who was in his room as usual—so I sat on the living room sofa by myself for awhile, brooding. I was angry, lonely, and vulnerable. Ethel had knocked the feet out from under me by obliquely referring to my failed marriage. I missed my wife and my little girl, and Ethel knew it. She preyed on my guilt when she wanted something from me. She'd been doing it for two and a half years as she'd moved steadily upward to senior counselor, while I remained at the Todd Street residence.

"Hello." It was James, standing on the landing above.

"Hello, James," I said.

He came downstairs and stood looking down at me. The strange brightness of his eyes had returned. Was this the other James? It couldn't be the one who had done the childish fingerpaint we'd hung on his bedroom wall three days ago.

"Who are you?" I asked.

"A lost traveler." There was sadness in his eyes . . . or was that James, struggling to escape this overpowering consciousness?

"How did you get into James' mind? You weren't always there, were you?"

"No, James is a shelter."

"You're using him," I said resentfully.

"Yes, but I've helped him, too. He couldn't have got out of the hospital on his own."

He was so articulate. James' mind could not create this character; he was too complex. "Where did you come from?"

"Places you've never dreamed of."

"Another planet?"

"My people originated in space itself. We're not really composed of matter at all, as you understand the term. I can adapt to organic forms easily . . . like water soaking into a sponge."

"Water in a sponge. . . . Can you be squeezed out again?"

"In a way, but the consequences for my host are dire."

"What happens?"

"The host dies."

I felt sick. "Why are you telling me this?"

James' face smiled. "Because you want to know."

"And the others didn't . . . Ethel . . . Dr. Frost and the others at the hospital . . . I suppose they explained what they could and ignored the rest."

"Precisely."

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I shook my head, hoping he'd go away, but he didn't. Only time would tell whether he was a savior or a demon. Nobody would believe me, so it was up to me to do what I could for James. "You won't . . . kill him, will you?"

He smiled again, using poor James Towers' face. "No."

I hoped he was telling the truth.

Ethel looked very annoyed as she shook the water droplets off her umbrella. "This isn't the only residence in this city," she said. "I can't come running over here every time something's bothering you, Don."

"Like I said on the phone, Ethel, this is important."

"I'm here after hours. I would be home in bed now if you hadn't insisted I come over here. Now what is it?"

"Not here." I looked up the landing toward James' room. We went down to the office.

"Okay, what gives?" Ethel demanded as I closed the office door behind us.

"It's James," I said, gesturing for her to sit down.

She refused the chair, preferring to stand and light a cigarette. "What about him?"

"I talked to his other personality today."

She seemed at a loss for words for a few seconds, and then she said, "Don, what's the point of all this melodrama?"

"Have you talked to him? The other one, I mean?"

"No."

"Well, maybe you should. It's not what the records say it is."

She turned and looked me right in the eye, ready to step on me. "Playing Sigmund Freud again, are you, Don? Exploring the Frontiers of the Human Mind . . ."

"Skip the sarcasm for once and listen to me, Ethel. This is for real. James is a case of one consciousness hiding *inside* another."

"What?" She fairly spat the word at me.

"You heard me."

That surprised her. She wasn't used to underlings talking back, especially me. She looked old and haggard at that moment, though she wasn't much older than I was. "Don, what is going *on* here?" she asked in a voice just barely above a whisper.

"I'm not entirely sure, but it's something you won't find in any psychology text."

"Wait a minute, Don. The range of multiple personality cases is extremely wide-ranging and varied. If you think . . ."

I interrupted her rudely. "This is not a multiple personality case. James One did not create James Two. He does not believe James Two has always

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existed. James Two told me with his own mouth that he came from outside. Multiple personalities are not created separately—they are part and parcel of the original person, two non-integrated parts of the whole, separated by a trauma or anxiety. This is a different creature altogether, Ethel. It isn't even *human*, for Christ's sake."

She stared at me in mock amazement. "I was wrong. You're not Freud, you're Carl Jung . . . or maybe Wilhelm Reich, psychology's answer to Erik von Daniken."

"Pull your claws in, Ethel. James may be in danger. This is serious business."

She blinked as smoke curled up from the butt clenched between her teeth. "What do you mean, he may be in danger?"

"Just what I said. James Two explained to me that he can only leave James One's body at the moment of death."

Her eyes were tearing with the smoke now. "You think he's going to attempt suicide? Is that what you're saying?"

"That's a possibility, isn't it?"

"Well, Dr. Frost wouldn't have okayed his moving into the residence if there was a chance he . . ."

"Dr. Frost could make a mistake," I said. "You know enough about physicians and hospitals to believe that, don't you?"

She said nothing, so I knew I was getting to her. As soon as she figured out a way to make it look like it was all her idea, we'd get some action. In the meantime, James had that thing living in his head, telling him *it* was James. It had taken great courage for James to tell me the truth . . . and the fact that James Two had come out of hiding suggested that he might be getting ready to leave his temporary home in James One's head.

"Why don't you come upstairs and talk to James?" I said, gesturing towards the stairs.

"Isn't he in bed?" said Ethel. "It's past eleven."

"Maybe James Two will come up while James is asleep."

"There better be something to this, Don," she said, finding some strength in those threatening words. She followed me upstairs, to the end of the corridor, the door facing the stairs. I knocked.

"Come in," said James' voice.

I opened the door and looked in. James was sitting on the bed, looking harmless enough. "I've brought somebody with me," I said.

He nodded and I went in, holding the door open for Ethel.

"Good evening, Dr. Silverman," he said.

"Ethel."

"Ethel." I looked into his eyes and saw only James there. Had James Two decided he'd told me too much this afternoon?

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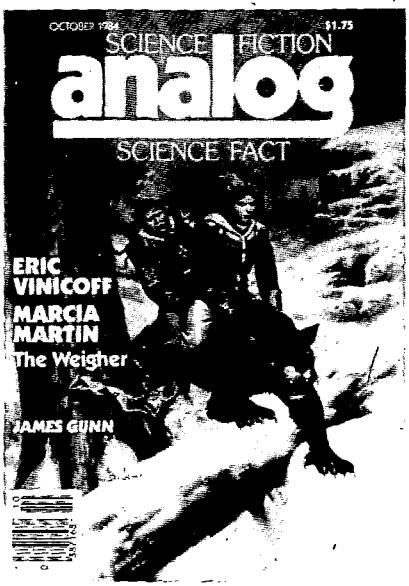

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"Ethel wants to meet your friend," I said, testing the waters.

"She never did before."

"Well, she does now. Will he talk to her?"

James' eyes sparked, and I knew that James Two had come out of hiding. I glanced at Ethel, seeing from her expression that she saw it too.

"What do you want?" James Two asked.

"I . . . want to know who you are," she said.

"I am James."

"You don't seem like the James I know," she said.

"I'm not." He smiled, chilling me to the bone. "And yet I am."

"You can't be both."

"Can't I? I'm using James' body, and he's using my intelligence. Can you separate these things?"

"Not completely, I suppose, but you're obviously controlling James."

"Is that a bad thing? *You* tell him when he can eat, sleep, exercise, go to work. Do I control him any more than that?"

"We're doing it for his own good," Ethel protested. "We're helping him adjust."

"I've helped him adjust to life on this world more in a year than the doctors did in thirty-nine years."

"But you're a parasite. You're living off him."

"I haven't harmed him, and I only came to him to survive. You talk as though I were deliberately victimizing him."

Ethel withdrew, sitting in the wooden chair by the window. In the bright lamplight, she looked drained, confused . . . old. She was in over her head for the first time in her life, and she couldn't handle it. She looked as though she wanted to run out of that room and wall James up in it forever. But she couldn't turn her back on this; it was her responsibility.

"I believe you *are* deliberately victimizing him," I said.

"How can you say that?" James Two sneered, distorting James' pleasant face. "I got him out of the hospital, didn't I?"

"I think you had your own reasons for that. Maybe you didn't like the possibility of having no place to go when James dies."

"There was an entire hospital full of hiding places."

"But they weren't as good as the hosts on the outside. Oh, you might be able to get inside a doctor or nurse if you were lucky, but here it would be much easier to find a normal person. You could just walk out the front door some afternoon and step in front of a car. James would die, and you'd enter the driver."

"Why should I kill James?" he asked. "I've grown very fond of him. I can wait until he dies naturally."

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"He's not terribly healthy, though," Ethel said. "His medication . . ."

"Oh, shit!" I said.

"What's the matter?"

"With all this going on, I forgot to fill his vial today. James hasn't had his dilantin."

James said nothing. His face was expressionless.

"Jesus, Don," Ethel said, "one of us better get him his pills." Her voice seemed small and far away. "This is bad, very bad."

"Why don't you go down?" I said, seeing that she was about to freak out. "Just bring the pills . . . and James' emergency meds."

"Okay." She got up and backed out of the room.

I turned towards the thing that looked like James Towers. "Why did you come here?" I demanded. "Why?"

"I didn't mean to. My destination was far away from here. Coming here was an accident."

"An accident?"

"Yes. And once I got here, I found that your atmosphere was toxic to the body I was using. Then I *couldn't* go back. My body was dying, and I had to get out of it." James grimaced, his words spoken in a quavering, forced voice.

"You made James dispose of the body, didn't you?" I said.

"Yes." He was shaking now, sweating. "He didn't want to, but it had to be done. I couldn't chance having the body found."

The spark went out of his eyes then, as though a switch had been thrown. He began to quake violently. A seizure had been brought on by lack of medication and the frightening memory.

"Bad," James gasped. "Bad thing in the garden." Droplets of sweat stood out on his forehead, and his knuckles whitened as he grasped the headboard. The bedframe groaned and creaked as he shook, his body twisting grotesquely.

These days they tell you not to try to restrain someone who's having a *grand mal* seizure, but that wasn't the common wisdom then, as far as the program was concerned anyway, and so I lunged for him and clutched his shoulders. His head shot to one side as though he'd been punched, his tongue thrusting out of his mouth like a serpent. His body was as rigid as rock. He gasped, doubling over in pain. I tried to pull his torso upright, but he was too strong.

I jumped on the bed and jammed my right knee into the small of his back. I slipped my hands under his armpits and around his shoulders, slowly straightening his body. It took every bit of strength I had.

Ginny and the others were in the doorway.

"Help me!" I cried.

Ginny rushed in to help, but the others were too frightened. She pushed

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at him from the front as I pulled from behind, and we somehow kept him from doubling over.

Ethel rushed into the room. "Christ, what is he—"

"The chlorpromazine!" I screamed. "Give him a shot!"

Ethel fumbled with the med kit while Ginny and I held on. My arms were aching, and I was sweating like a pig. Something wet dripped onto my hand from James' mouth. The acrid smell of bile assailed my nostrils.

Ethel filled the syringe and squeezed its plunger to get rid of the air bubbles. A few drops of chlorpromazine flew out of the needle's point. She brought it towards us, looking as though she might faint at any moment.

"Hurry!" I shouted.

James' body was coiling cruelly in the throes of the *grand mal*. I couldn't hold on much longer.

"Where? . . ."

"His chest, his shoulder, his neck. Anywhere, for Christ's sake!"

She tried to stick him with it. James gurgled and suddenly reared up like a horse, with me still on his back. He shook me off like a dog shaking off water after a bath, brushed by Ethel, and charged head first toward the window.

The glass shattered beneath his weight, and he was gone into the rain and the darkness.

Of course, Ethel got me fired after James' death. Nobody believed a word I said, and she denied everything. Just another loonie who fell out of a window while having a seizure. The last I heard, Ethel had moved to another state and was moving up the ladder of success in the mental health biz . . . maybe with a little help from her friend.

I've been doing a lot better myself since I got into the advertising field, and I'm getting back together with my wife. I can't wait to see my little girl again. Success comes easily to me now, not like when I worked at the residence.

Sometimes I suspect *I'm* the one who got a friend in my head when James died. If I did, he's never shown himself. I prefer to think I've improved my life all by myself.

I've never had an opportunity to compare notes with Ethel. Sometimes, when I suddenly realize I'm talking to myself, I'm afraid I'm *really* talking to Donald Two, but I honestly don't know.

I hope I never find out. ●

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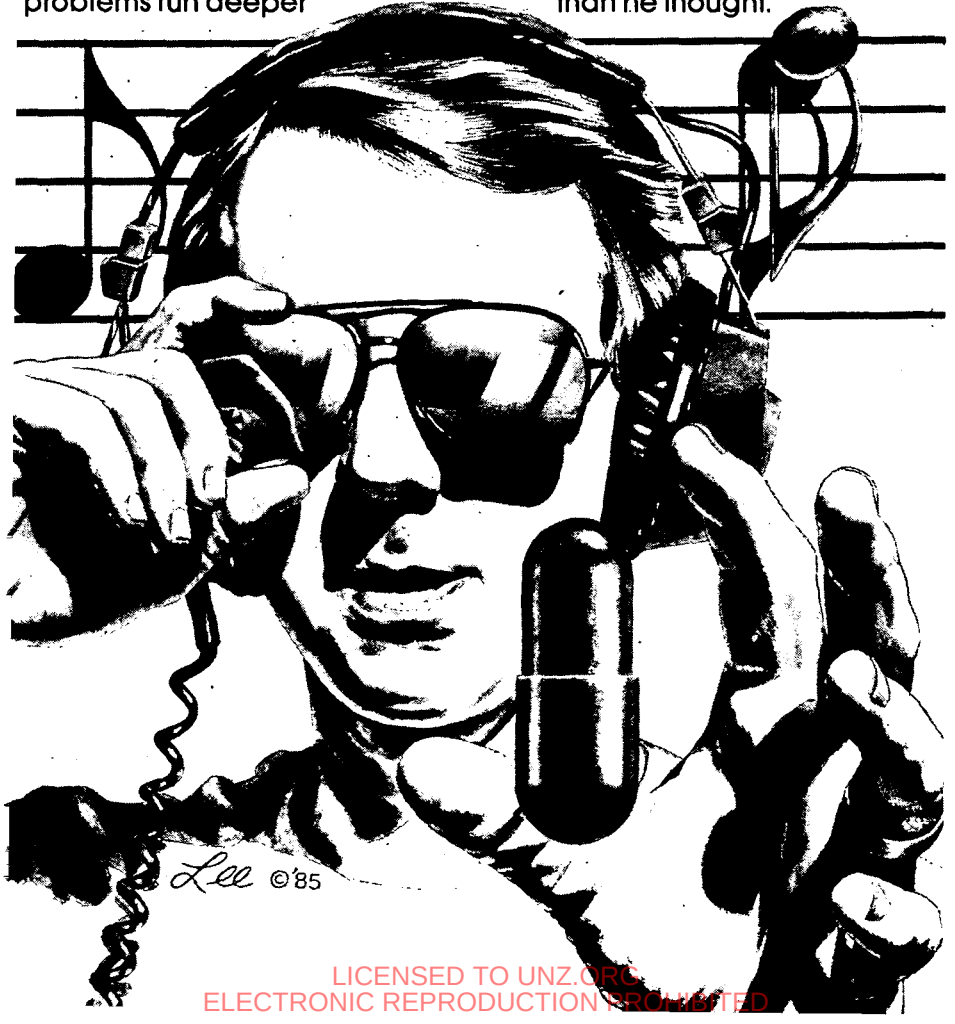
art: Terry Lee

JEFF BECK

by Lewis Shiner

Lewis Shiner's short story "The War at Home" (*IAsfm*, May 1985), has garnered him a number of Nebula nominations. He returns to our pages with a wistful tale about a man who gets his heart's desire—only to find that problems run deeper than he thought.



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Felix was 34. He worked four ten-hour days a week at Allied Sheet Metal, running an Amada CNC turret punch press. At night he made cassettes with his twin TEAC dbx machines. He'd recorded over a thousand of them so far, over 160 miles of tape, and he'd carefully hand lettered the labels for each one.

He'd taped everything Jeff Beck had ever done, from the Yardbirds' *For Your Love* through all the Jeff Beck Groups and the solo albums; he had the English singles of "Hi Ho Silver Lining" and "TallyMan"; he had all the session work, from Donovan to Stevie Wonder to Tina Turner.

In the shop he wore a Walkman and listened to his tapes. Nothing seemed to cut the sound of tortured metal like the diamond-edged perfection of Beck's guitar. It kept him light on his feet, dancing in place at the machine, and sometimes the sheer beauty of it made tears come up in his eyes.

On Fridays he dropped Karen off at her job at *Pipeline Digest* and drove around to thrift shops and used book stores looking for records. After he'd cleaned them up and put them on tape he didn't care about them anymore; he sold them back to collectors and made enough profit to keep himself in blank UDXL-II's.

Occasionally he would stop at a pawn shop or music store and look at the guitars. Lightning Music on 183 had a Charvel/Jackson soloist, exactly like the one Beck played except for the hideous lilac-purple finish. Felix yearned to pick it up but was afraid of making a fool out of himself. He had an old Sears Silvertone at home and two or three times a year he would take it out and try to play it, but he could never even manage to get it properly in tune..

More often than not Felix spent his Friday afternoons in a dingy bar down the street from *Pipeline Digest*, alone in a back booth with a pitcher of Budweiser and an anonymous brown sack of records. On those afternoons Karen would find him in the office parking lot, already asleep in the passenger seat, and she would drive home. She worried a little, but it never happened more than two or three times in a month. The rest of the time he hardly drank at all, and he never hit her or chased other women. Whatever it was that ate at him was so deeply buried it just seemed easier to leave well enough alone.

One Thursday afternoon a friend at work took him aside.

"Listen," Manuel said, "are you feeling okay? I mean you seem real down lately."

"I don't know," Felix told him. "I don't know what it is."

"Everything okay with Karen?"

"Yeah, it's fine. Work is okay. I'm happy and everything. I just . . . I don't know. Feel like something's missing."

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Manuel nodded to himself for a second, then took something out of his pocket. "A guy gave me this. You know I don't do this kind of shit no' more, but the guy said it was killer stuff."

It looked like a Contac capsule, complete with the little foil blister pack. But when Felix looked closer the tiny colored spheres inside the gelatin seemed to sparkle in rainbow colors.

"What is it?"

"I don't know. He wouldn't say exactly. When I asked him what it did all he said was, 'Anything you want.' "

He dropped Karen off at work the next morning and drove aimlessly down Lamar for a while. He hadn't hit Half Price Books in a couple of months, but his heart wasn't really in it. He drove home and got the capsule off the top of his dresser where he'd left it.

Felix hadn't done acid in years, hadn't taken anything other than beer and an occasional joint in longer than he could remember. Maybe it was time for a change.

He swallowed the capsule, put Jeff Beck's *Wired* on the stereo, and switched the speakers into the den. He stretched out on the couch and looked at his watch. It was ten o'clock.

He closed his eyes and thought about what Manuel had said. It would do anything he wanted. So what did he want?

This was a drug for Karen, Felix thought. She talked all the time about what she would do if she could have any one thing in the world. She called it the Magic Wish game, though it wasn't really a game and nobody ever won it.

What the guy meant, Felix told himself, was it would make me see anything I wanted to. Like mild hit of psilocybin. A light show and a bit of rush.

But he couldn't get away from the idea. What would he wish for if he could have anything? He had an answer ready; he supposed everybody did. He framed the words very carefully in his mind.

I want to play guitar like Jeff Beck, he thought.

He sat up. He had the feeling that he'd dropped off to sleep and lost a couple of hours, but when he looked at his watch it was only five after ten. The tape was still playing "Come Dancing." His head was clear and he couldn't feel any effects from the drug.

But then he'd only taken it five minutes ago. It wouldn't have had a chance to do anything yet.

He felt different though, sort of sideways, and something was wrong with his hands. They ached and tingled at the same time, and felt like they could crush rocks.

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And the music. Somehow he was hearing the notes differently than he'd ever heard them before, hearing them with a certain knowledge of how they'd been made, the way he could look at a piece of sheet metal and see how it had been sheared and ground and polished into shape.

Anything you want, Manuel had said.

His newly powerful hands began to shake.

He went into his studio, a converted storeroom off the den. One wall was lined with tapes; across from it were shelves for the stereo, a few albums, and a window with heavy black drapes. The ceiling and the end walls were covered with gray paper egg cartons, making it nearly soundproof.

He took out the old Silvertone and it felt different in his hands, smaller, lighter, infinitely malleable. He switched off the Beck tape, patched the guitar into the stereo and tried tuning it up.

He couldn't understand why it had been so difficult before. When he hit harmonics he could hear the notes beating against each other with perfect clarity. He kept his left hand on the neck and reached across it with his right to turn the machines, a clean, precise gesture he'd never made before.

For an instant he felt a breathless wonder come over him. The drug had worked, had changed him. He tried to hang on to the strangeness but it slipped away. He was tuning a guitar. It was something he knew how to do.

He played "Freeway Jam," one of Max Middleton's tunes from *Blow By Blow*. Again, for just a few seconds, he felt weightless, ecstatic. Then the guitar brought him back down. He'd never noticed what a pig the Silvertone was, how high the strings sat over the fretboard, how the frets buzzed and the machines slipped. When he couldn't remember the exact notes on the record he tried to jam around them, but the guitar fought him at every step.

It was no good. He had to have a guitar. He could hear the music in his head but there was no way he could wring it out of the Silvertone.

His heart began to hammer and his throat closed up tight. He knew what he needed, what he would have to do to get it. He and Karen had over $1300 in a savings account. It would be enough.

He was home again by three o'clock with the purple Jackson soloist and a Fender Princeton amp. The purple finish wasn't nearly as ugly as he remembered it and the guitar fit into his hands like an old lover. He set up in the living room and shut all the windows and played, eyes closed, swaying a little from side to side, bringing his right hand all the way up over his head on the long trills.

Just like Jeff Beck.

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He had no idea how long he'd been playing when he heard the phone ringing. He lunged for it, the phone cord bouncing noisily off the strings.

It was Karen. "Is something wrong?" she asked.

"Uh, no," Felix said. "What time is it?"

"Five thirty." She sounded close to tears.

"Oh shit. I'll be right there."

He hid the guitar and amp in his studio. She would understand, he told himself, but he wasn't ready to break it to her just yet.

In the car she seemed afraid to talk to him, even to ask why he'd been late. Felix could only think about the purple Jackson waiting for him at home.

He sat through a dinner of Chef Boyardee Pizza, using three beers to wash it down, and after he'd done the dishes he shut himself in his studio.

For four hours he played everything that came into his head, from blues to free jazz to "Over Under Sideways Down" to things he'd never heard before, things so alien and illogical that he couldn't translate the sounds he heard. When he finally stopped Karen had gone to bed. He undressed and crawled in beside her, his brain reeling.

He woke up to the sound of the vacuum cleaner. He remembered everything, but in the bright morning light it all seemed like a weirdly vivid hallucination, especially the part where he'd emptied the savings account.

Saturday was his morning for yard work, but first he had to deal with the drug business, to prove to himself that he'd only imagined it. He went into the studio and lifted the lid of the guitar case and then sat down across from it in his battered blue-green lounge-chair.

As he stared at it he felt his love and terror of the guitar swell in his chest like cancer.

He picked it up and played the solo from "Got the Feelin' " and then looked up. Karen was standing in the open door.

"Oh my god," she said. "Oh my god. What have you done?"

Felix hugged the guitar to his chest. He couldn't think of anything to say to her.

"How long have you had this? Oh. You bought it yesterday, didn't you? That's why you couldn't even remember to pick me up." She slumped against the door frame. "I don't believe it. I don't *even* believe it."

Felix looked at the floor.

"The bedroom air conditioner is broken," Karen said. Her voice sounded like she was squeezing it with both hands; if she let it go it would turn into hysteria. "The car's running on four bald tires. The TV picture looks like hell. I can't remember the last time we went out to dinner or a

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movie." She pushed both hands into the sides of her face, twisting it into a mask of anguish.

"How much did it cost?" When Felix didn't answer she said, "It cost everything, didn't it? *Everything*. Oh god, I just can't believe it."

She closed the door on him and he started playing again, frantic scraps and tatters, a few bars from "Situation," a chorus of "You Shook Me," anything to drown out the memory of Karen's voice.

It took him an hour to wind down, and at the end of it he had nothing left to play. He put the guitar away and got in the car and drove around to the music stores.

On the bulletin board at Ray Hennig's he found an ad for a guitarist and called the number from a pay phone in the strip center outside. He talked to somebody named Sid and set up an audition for the next afternoon.

When he got home Karen was waiting in the living room. "You want anything from Safeway?" she asked. Felix shook his head and she walked out. He heard the car door slam and the engine shriek to life.

He spent the rest of the afternoon in the studio with the door shut, just looking at the guitar. He didn't need to practice; his hands already knew what to do.

The guitar was almost unearthly in its beauty and perfection. It was the single most expensive thing he'd ever bought for his own pleasure, but he couldn't look at it without being twisted up inside by guilt. And yet, at the same time he lusted for it passionately, wanted to run his hands endlessly over the hard, slick finish, bury his head in the plush case and inhale the musky aroma of guitar polish, feel the strings pulsing under the tips of his fingers.

Looking back he couldn't see anything he could have done differently. Why wasn't he happy?

When he came out the living room was dark. He could see a strip of light under the bedroom door, hear the snarling hiss of the TV. He felt like he was watching it all from the deck of a passing ship; he could stretch out his arms but everything would still just drift out of his reach.

He realized he hadn't eaten since breakfast. He made himself a sandwich and drank an iced tea glass full of whiskey and fell asleep on the couch.

A little after noon on Sunday he staggered into the bathroom. His back ached and his fingers throbbed and his mouth tasted like a kitchen drain. He showered and brushed his teeth and put on a clean T-shirt and jeans. Through the bedroom window he could see Karen lying out on the lawn chair with the Sunday paper. The pages were pulled so tight that her

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fingers made ridges across them. She was trying not to look back at the house.

He made some toast and instant coffee and went to sort through his tapes. He felt like he ought to try to learn some songs, but nothing seemed worth the trouble. Finally he played a Mozart symphony that he'd taped for Karen, jealous of the sound of the orchestra, wanting to be able to make it with his hands.

The band practiced in a run-down neighborhood off Rundberg and IH35. All the houses had big dogs behind chain link fences and plastic Big Wheels in the driveways. Sid met him at the door and took him back to a garage hung with army blankets and littered with empty beer cans.

Sid was tall and thin and wore a black Def Leppard T-shirt. He had blond hair in a shag to his shoulders and acne. The drummer and bass player had already set up; none of the three of them looked to be more than twenty-two or -three years old. Felix wanted to leave but he had no place else to go.

"Want a brew?" Sid asked, and Felix nodded. He took the Jackson out of its case and Sid, coming back with the beer, stopped in his tracks. "Wow," he said. "Is that your axe?" Felix nodded again. "Righteous," Sid said.

"You know any Van Halen?" the drummer asked. Felix couldn't see anything but a zebra striped headband and a patch of black hair behind the two bass drums and the double row of toms.

"Sure," Felix lied. "Just run over the chords for me, it's been a while." Sid walked him through the progression for "Dance the Night Away" on his 3/4 sized Melody Maker and the drummer counted it off. Sid and the bass player both had Marshall amps and Felix's little Princeton, even on ten, got lost in the wash of noise.

In less than a minute Felix got tired of the droning power chords and started toying with them, adding a ninth, playing a modal run against them. Finally Sid stopped and said, "No, man, it's like this," and patiently went through the chords again, A, B, E, with a C# minor on the chorus.

"Yeah, okay," Felix said and drank some more beer.

They played "Beer Drinkers and Hell Raisers" by ZZ Top and "Rock and Roll" by Led Zeppelin. Felix tried to stay interested, but every time he played something different from the record Sid would stop and correct him.

"Man, you're a hell of a guitar player, but I can't believe you're as good as you are and you don't know any of these solos."

"You guys do any Jeff Beck?" Felix asked.

Sid looked at the others. "I guess we could do 'Shapes of Things,' right? Like on that Gary Moore album?"

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"I can fake it, I guess," the drummer said.

"And could you maybe turn down a little?" Felix said.

"Uh, yeah, sure," Sid said, and adjusted the knob on his guitar a quarter turn.

Felix leaned into the opening chords, pounding the Jackson, thinking about nothing but the music, putting a depth of rage and frustration into it he never knew he had. But he couldn't sustain it; the drummer was pounding out 2 and 4, oblivious to what Felix was playing, and Sid had cranked up again and was whaling away on his Gibson with the flat of his hand.

Felix jerked his strap loose and set the guitar back in its case.

"What's the matter?" Sid asked, the band grinding to a halt behind him.

"I just haven't got it today," Felix said. He wanted to break that pissant little toy Gibson across Sid's nose, and the strength of his hatred scared him. "I'm sorry," he said, clenching his teeth. "Maybe some other time."

"Sure," Sid said. "Listen, you're really good, but you need to learn more solos, you know?"

Felix burned rubber as he pulled away, skidding through a U-turn at the end of the street. He couldn't slow down. The car fishtailed when he rocketed out onto Rundberg and he nearly went into a light pole. Pounding the wheel with his fists, hot tears running down his face, he pushed the accelerator to the floor.

Karen was gone when Felix got home. He found a note on the refrigerator: "Sherry picked me up. Will call in a couple of days. Have a lot to think about. K."

He set up the Princeton and tried to play what he was feeling and it came out bullshit, a jerkoff reflex blues progression that didn't mean a thing. He leaned the guitar against the wall and went into his studio, shoving one tape after another into the decks, and every one of them sounded the same, another tired, simpleminded rehash of the obvious.

"I didn't ask for this!" he shouted at the empty house. "You hear me? This isn't what I asked for!"

But it was, and as soon as the words were out he knew he was lying to himself. Faster hands and a better ear weren't enough to make him play like Beck. He had to change inside to play that way, and he wasn't strong enough to handle it, to have every piece of music he'd ever loved turn sour, to need perfection so badly that it was easier to give it up than learn to live with the flaws.

He sat on the couch for a long time and then, finally, he picked up the guitar again. He found a clean rag and polished the body and neck and wiped each individual string. Then, when he had wiped all his finger-

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prints away, he put it back into the case, still holding it with the rag. He closed the latches and set it next to the amp, by the front door.

For the first time in two days he felt like he could breathe again. He turned out all the lights and opened the windows and sat down on the couch with his eyes closed. Gradually his hands became still and he could hear, very faintly, the fading music of the traffic and the crickets and the wind. ●

MARTIN GARDNER (from page 19)

SOLUTION TO BLUES IN THE NIGHT

The pink lady's reasoning seems intuitively correct, but it is quite wrong. The background information *is* essential in estimating the chances that the man was a blue.

I ran across this problem in a recently published book, *The Mind's New Science: A History of the Cognitive Revolution,* by Howard Gardner. The original problem involved the color of a taxicab as seen by a man with poor eyesight. Let's sharpen it by modeling it with an urn that contains 100 marbles. Fifteen marbles are green, 85 are blue. The marbles are randomly mixed, someone closes his eyes and draws a marble. He opens his eyes, notes the color, then replaces it in the urn. No one else is in the room at the time.

Later he says to a friend: "The marble I selected was green."

On the assumption that the man is accurate in distinguishing green from blue 4/5 of the time, what is the probability that the marble he selected was blue instead of green?

There are several ways to go about answering this question. One way is to draw the probability tree shown in the illustration. The figures at the bottom show four percentages:

1. The percentage of times the man calls blue and the marble is blue = 68 percent.
2. The percentage of times the man calls green, and the marble is blue = 17 percent.
3. The percentage of times the man calls green, and the marble is green = 12 percent.
4. The percentage of times the man calls blue, and the marble is green = 3 percent.

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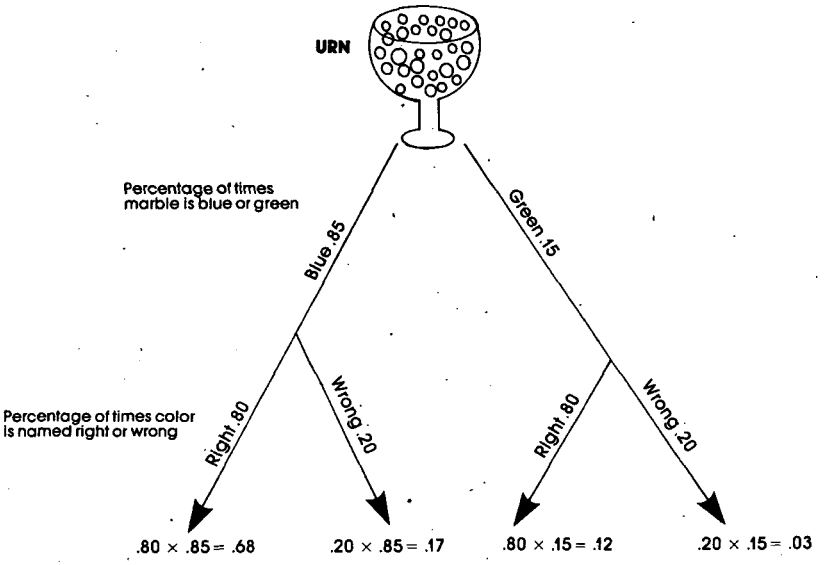
These percentages, at the bottom of the inverted tree, are obtained by multiplying the values on the two line segments that connect each end of the branch with the urn at the top. The four percentages add, of course, to 100 percent.



We see that the man called a marble green .17 + .12, or 29 percent of the time. So the correct answer is that the probability the marble (or murder suspect) was blue is 17/29, or more than 1/2. A far cry from the pink lady's estimate of 1/5!

If you are doubtful about this answer, you may be able to convince yourself it is correct by the following more laborious procedure. Using *B* for a blue marble and *G* for green, list 85 *B*s and 15 *G*s on a sheet of paper. Circle 1/5 of the *B*s to indicate the number of times the man will incorrectly call a blue marble green. Circle 4/5 of the *G*s to indicate the times he will correctly call a marble green. There will be 29 circled numbers, indicating the 29 times the man said green. Count the number of *B*s in this set. You'll find there are 17. Therefore the probability the marble was blue is 17/29 = .586+.

In fairness to the pink lady I must add that L. Jonathan Cohen, a philosopher at Oxford University, has strongly defended her reasoning. He contends that in such a trial we are not dealing with a well-defined urn model in which it can be assumed that an experiment has been repeated hundreds of times. We have only the one-time case, and knowing

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that the person who named the color is wrong 1/5 of the time is all we need to know. The background information is irrelevant. The pink juror reasoned properly when she estimated the probability the man was blue at 1/5.

If you care to investigate Cohen's arguments you'll find them in his controversial paper "Can Human Irrationality Be Experimentally Demonstrated?" It's in *Behavior and Brain Science,* Volume 4, 1981. I side with the majority of statisticians who think Cohen is misguided, and that all he has done is show that few people have sufficient grasp of the subtle counterintuitive aspects of statistics to make good probability judgments.

Let's reduce the problem to absurdity. Suppose the man is right about the color just half the time. (Perhaps he flips a coin to decide whether to call blue or green.) If you had no background information about the ratio of blue to green marbles it would be rational to estimate the probability as 1/2 that the marble was blue when the man said green. But surely you would change your estimate if you knew the urn held a billion blue marbles to one green. And if you knew the urn contained *only* blue marbles, you would consider what the man said as totally irrelevant.

Not so fast! Let's defend Cohen's case. Our urn model assumes that the man who fled the scene of the crime was randomly selected from the city's mixed racial distribution, but we really don't know that. The woman may have had lots of boy friends, all or most of them green. Cohen's point is that situations like this, in real life, are too poorly defined, with too many unknown factors, to allow the application of formal reasoning. In any case, the problem has generated a great deal of sharp controversy. You'll find the most important papers listed in Gardner's (no relation) book.

INTERSTELLAR DUST

Raison d'être
for the vacuum of space.

—Peter Payack

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Petrarch says that
"rarely do great beauty
and great virture dwell together."
Indeed, perhaps
the presence of one
precludes the other . . .

by Isaac Asimov

THE EYE OF THE BEHOLDER

art: Hank Jankus

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George and I were sitting on a bench at the boardwalk and contemplating the broad expanse of the beach and the sparkling sea in the distance. I was immersed in the innocent pleasure of watching the young ladies in their bikinis and wondering what they could get out of the beauties of life that was half as much as they contributed.

Knowing George as I did, I rather suspected his own thoughts to be considerably less nobly aesthetic than mine. I was certain that they would deal with the more useful aspects of those same young ladies.

It was with considerable surprise, then, that I heard him say, "Old man, here we sit, drinking in the beauties of nature in the shape of the female form divine—to coin a phrase—and yet surely true beauty is not, and cannot be, so evident. True beauty, after all, is so precious that it must be hidden from the eyes of trivial observers. Have you ever thought that?"

"No," I said, "I've never thought that and, now that you mention it, I still don't. What's more, I don't think that you have ever thought that."

George sighed. "Talking with you, old chap, is like swimming in molasses—very little return for very great effort. I have watched you observing that tall goddess there, the one whose wisps of fine textile do nothing to conceal the few square inches they purport to cover. Surely, you understand that those are mere superficialities that she displays."

"I have never asked for much out of life," I said, in my humble way. "I'll be satisfied with superficialities of that sort."

"Think how much more beautiful a young woman would be—even a woman quite unprepossessing to the untutored eyes of one such as you—if she possessed the eternal glories of goodness, unselfishness, cheerfulness, uncomplaining industry, and concern for others; all the virtues, in short, that shed gold and grace on a woman."

"What I'm thinking, George," I said, "is that you must be drunk. What on earth can you possibly know about virtues such as those?"

"I am totally familiar with them," said George, haughtily, "because I practice them assiduously, and to the full."

"Undoubtedly," I said, "only in the privacy of your own room and in the dark."

Disregarding your crude remark [George said] I must explain that even if I did not have personal knowledge of these virtues, I would have learned of them through my acquaintance with a young woman named Melisande Ott, née Melisande Renn, and known to her loving husband, Octavius Ott, as Maggie. She was known to me as Maggie also, for she was the daughter of a dear friend of mine, now, alas, deceased, and she always considered me her Uncle George.

I must admit that there is a bit of me, that like you, appreciates the

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subtle qualities of what you call "superficialities."—Yes, old boy, I know I used the term first but we will not get anywhere if you are going to interrupt me constantly over trivialities.

Because of this small weakness in myself, I must also admit that when, in an access of joy at seeing me, she would squeal and throw her arms about me, my delight at the event was not quite as great as it would have been had she been more generously-proportioned. She was quite thin and her bones were painfully prominent. Her nose was large, her chin weak, her hair rather lank and straight and pure mouse in color, and her eyes an undefinable gray-green. Her cheekbones were broad so that she rather resembled a chipmunk that had just completed a fine collection of nuts and seeds. In short, she was not the type of young woman whose arrival on the scene would cause any young man present to begin breathing rapidly and striving to get closer.

But she had a good heart. She bore up, with a wistful smile, at the visible winces that shook the average young man who met her for the first time, without warning. She served as bridesmaid for all her friends in turn with a fresh group of wistful smiles. She served as godmother to innumerable children, and as baby-sitter to others, and was as deft a bottle-feeder as you could see in a long month of Sundays.

She brought hot soup to the deserving poor, and to the undeserving as well, though there were some who said that it was the undeserving who more nearly deserved the visitation. She performed various duties at the local church, several times over—once for herself and once each for those of her friends who preferred the guilty splendors of the movie palaces to selfless service. She taught classes at Sunday school, keeping the children cheerful by making (as they thought) funny faces at them. She also frequently led them all in a reading of the nine commandments. (She left out the one about adultery for experience had taught her that this invariably led to inconvenient questions.) She also served as a volunteer at the local branch of the public library.

Naturally, she lost all hope of getting married somewhere about the age of four. Even the chance of having a casual date with a member of the opposite sex seemed to her to be a rather impossible dream by the time she had reached the age of ten.

Many a time she would say to me, "I am not unhappy, Uncle George. The world of men is sealed to me, yes, always excepting your dear self and the memory of poor papa, but there is far more true happiness in doing good."

She would then visit the prisoners in the county jail in order to plead for repentance, and for conversion to good works. It was only one or two of the crasser sort who volunteered for solitary confinement on those days on which she was due to arrive.

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* * *

But then she met Octavius Ott, a newcomer to the neighborhood, a young electrical engineer with a responsible position at the power company. He was a worthy young man—grave, industrious, persevering, courageous, honest and reverent—but he was not what you or I would call handsome. In fact, not to put too fine a point on it, he was not what anyone in recorded history would have called handsome.

He had a receding hairline (or, more accurately, a receded one), a bulbous forehead, a snub nose, thin lips, ears that stood well away from his head, and a prominent Adam's apple that was never entirely still. What there was of his hair was rather rust-colored, and he had an irregular sprinkling of freckles on his face and arms.

I happened to be with Maggie when she and Octavius met in the street for the first time. Both were equally unprepared and both started like a pair of skittish horses suddenly confronted by a dozen clowns in a dozen fright wigs who were blowing a dozen whistles. For a moment, I expected both Maggie and Octavius to rear and whinny.

The moment passed, however, and each successfully weathered the flash of panic they had experienced. She did nothing more than place her hand on her heart as though to keep it from leaping out of the rib cage in search of a more secure hiding place, while he wiped his brow as though to erase a horrid memory.

I had met Octavius some days before and so I was able to introduce them to each other. Each held out a tentative hand as though not anxious to add the sense of touch to that of vision.

Later that afternoon, Maggie broke a long silence and said to me, "What an odd young man that Mr. Ott seems to be."

I said, with that originality of metaphor which my friends all enjoy, "You mustn't judge a book by its cover, my dear."

"But the cover exists, Uncle George," she said, earnestly, "and we must take that into account. I dare say that the average young woman, frivolous and unfeeling, would have little to do with Mr. Ott. It would be a deed of kindness, therefore, to show him that not all young women are totally heedless, but that one at least does not turn against a young man for nothing more than his unfortunate resemblance to . . . to . . ." She paused as no comparable member of the animal kingdom occurred to her, so that she had to end lamely, but warmly, with "whatever it is that he resembles. I must be kind to him."

I do not know whether Octavius had a confidant to whom he could unburden himself in similar fashion. Probably not, for few of us—if any—are blessed with Uncle Georges. Nevertheless, I'm quite certain, judging from later events, that precisely the same thoughts occurred to him—in reverse, of course.

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In any case, each labored to be kind to the other, tentatively and hesitantly at first, then warmly, and at last passionately. What began as casual encounters at the library, became visits to the zoo, then evenings at the movies and at dances, until, finally, what took place could only be described—if you'll excuse my language—as trysts.

People began to expect to see one whenever they saw the other, for they had become an indissoluble pair. Some of those in the neighborhood complained bitterly that to get a double dose of Octavius and Maggie was more than the human eye could be expected to endure, and more than one supercilious elitist invested in sunglasses.

I will not say that I was totally lacking in sympathy for these extreme views, but others—more tolerant and, perhaps, more reasonable—pointed out that the features on one were, by some peculiar chance, quite opposite to the corresponding features of the other. Seeing the two together tended to introduce a canceling effect, so that both together were more endurable than either separately. Or at least, that was what some claimed.

Finally, there came a day when Maggie burst in on me and said, "Uncle George, Octavius is the light and life of my existence. He is staunch, strong, steady, sturdy, and stable. He is a lovely man."

"Internally, my dear," I said, "I'm sure he is all of these things. His outward appearance, however, is—"

"Adorable," she said staunchly, strongly, steadily, sturdily, and stably. "Uncle George, he feels about me as I feel about him, and we are going to be married."

"You and Ott?" I said, faintly. An involuntary image of the likely issue of such a marriage swam before my eyes and I turned rather faint.

"Yes," she said. "He has told me that I am the sun of his delight and the moon of his joy. Then he added that I was all the stars of hishappiness. He is a very poetic man."

"So it seems," I said, dubiously. "When are you going to be married?"

"As soon as possible," she said.

There was nothing do but grit my teeth. The announcement was made, the preparations were carried through, the marriage was performed with myself giving away the bride. Everyone in the neighborhood attended out of disbelief. Even the minister allowed a reverent look of astonishment to cross his face.

Nor did anyone seem to gaze gladly at the young couple. All through the ceremony, the audience stared at its various knees. Except the minister. He kept his eyes firmly fixed on the rose window over the front door.

I left the neighborhood some time after, took up lodgings in another part of the city and rather lost touch with Maggie. Eleven years later,

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however, I had occasion to return over a matter of an investment in a friend's learned studies of the racing qualities of horses. I seized the opportunity of visiting Maggie, who was, among her other well-hidden beauties, a marvelous cook.

I arrived at lunch time. Octavius was away at work, but that didn't matter. I am not a selfish man and I gladly ate his portion in addition to mine.

I could not help but notice, however, that there was a shade of grief on Maggie's face. I said, over the coffee, "Are you unhappy, Maggie? Is your marriage not going well?"

"Oh, no, Uncle George," she said, vehemently, "our marriage was made in heaven. Although we remain childless, we are so wrapped up in each other that we are barely aware of the loss. We live in a sea of perpetual bliss and have nothing more to ask of the universe."

"I see," I said, my teeth rather on edge, "then why this shade of grief I seem to detect in you?"

She hesitated, and then burst out, "Oh, Uncle George, you are such a sensitive man. There *is* one thing that does interpose a bit of grit in the wheels of delight."

"And that is?"

"My appearance."

"Your appearance? What is wrong—" I swallowed and found myself unable to finish the sentence.

"I am not beautiful," said Maggie, with the air of one imparting a well-hidden secret.

"Ah!" I said.

"And I wish I were—for Octavius' sake. I want to be lovely just for him."

"Does he complain about your appearance?" I asked cautiously.

"Octavius? Certainly not. He bears his suffering in noble silence."

"Then how do you know he is suffering?"

"My woman's heart tells me so."

"But, Maggie, Octavius is himself—well—not beautiful."

"How can you say that?" said Maggie, indignantly. "He's gorgeous."

"But perhaps he thinks *you're* gorgeous."

"Oh, no," said Maggie, "how could he think that?"

"Well, is he interested in other women?"

"Uncle George!" said Maggie, shocked. "What a base thought. I'm surprised at you. Octavius has no eyes for anyone but me."

"Then what does it matter if you are beautiful or not?"

"It's for *him*," she said. "Oh, Uncle George, I want to be beautiful for *him*."

And, leaping into my lap in a most unexpected and unpleasant way,

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she moistened the lapel of my jacket with her tears. In fact, it was wringing wet before she was quite through.

I had by then, of course, met Azazel, the two-centimeter extraterrestrial I may have mentioned to you on occa— Now, old man, there is no need for you to mutter "ad nauseam" in that supercilious manner. Anyone who writes as you do should be embarrassed at bringing up the thought of nausea in any connection whatever.

In any case, I called up Azazel.

Azazel was asleep when he arrived. He had a bag of some green material covering his tiny head and only the muffled sound of quick soprano squeaking from within gave evidence that he was alive. That, and the fact that every once in a while his little sinewy tail stiffened and vibrated with a tinny hum.

I waited several minutes for him to wake up naturally, and when that did not happen, I gently removed his head-bag with a pair of tweezers. His eyes opened slowly and focused on me, whereupon he gave an exaggerated start.

He said, "For a moment I thought I was merely having a nightmare. I didn't count on *you!*"

I ignored his childish petulance and said, "I have a task for you to do for me."

"Naturally," said Azazel sourly. "You don't suppose I am expecting you to offer to do a task for me."

"I would, in a moment," I said, suavely, "if my inferior abilities were sufficient to do anything a personage of your stature and power would find of significant use."

"True, true," said Azazel, mollified.

It is truly disgusting, I might add, the susceptibility of some minds to flattery. I've seen you, for instance, go out of your mind with fatuous joy when someone asks you for an autograph. But back to my tale—

"What is involved?" Azazel asked.

"I wish you to make a young woman beautiful."

Azazel shuddered. "I'm not sure I could bring myself to do that. The standards of beauty among your bloated and miserable species of life are atrocious."

"But they are ours. I will tell you what to do."

"*You* will tell *me* what to do!" he shrieked, vibrating with outrage. "*You* will tell *me* how to stimulate and modify hair follicles, how to strengthen muscles, how to grow or dissolve bone? Indeed? *You* will tell *me* all this!"

"Not at all," I said, humbly. "The details of the mechanism that such a deed would require are only to be handled by a being of your magnificent

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attainments. Allow me, however, to tell you the superficial effects to be achieved."

Azazel was once again mollified, and we went over the matter in detail.

"Remember," I said. "The effects are to be brought to fruition over a period of at least sixty days. A too-sudden change might excite remark."

"Do you mean," said Azazel, "I'm to spend sixty of your days supervising and adjusting and correcting? Is my time worth nothing in your opinion?"

"Ah, but you could then write this up for one of your world's biological journals. It is not a task that many on your world would have the ability or patience to undertake. You will be greatly admired as a result."

Azazel nodded, thoughtfully. "I scorn cheap adulation, of course," he said, "but I suppose I have a duty to hold myself up as a role model for inferior members of my species." He sighed with a shrill, whistling sound. "It is troublesome and embarrassing, but it is my duty."

I had a duty as well. I felt I ought to remain in the neighborhood during the interval of change. My horse-racing friend put me up in return for my expertise and advice on the results of various experimental runnings, with the result that he lost very little money.

Each day I sought an excuse to see Maggie and the results slowly began to show. Her hair grew fuller-bodied, and developed a graceful wave. Red-gold glints began to appear, lending it a welcome richness.

Little by little, her jawbone grew more prominent, her cheekbones more delicate and higher. Her eyes developed a definite blue that deepened from day to day to what was almost violet. The eyelids developed just the tiniest oriental slant. Her ears grew more shapely and lobes appeared. Her figure rounded and grew almost opulent, bit by bit, and her waist narrowed.

People were puzzled. I heard them myself. "Maggie," they would say, "what have you done to yourself? Your hair looks simply marvelous. You look ten years younger."

"I haven't done *anything*," Maggie would say. She was as puzzled as all the others were. Except me, of course.

She said to me, "Do you notice any change in me, Uncle George?"

I said, "You look delightful, but you have always looked delightful to me, Maggie."

"Maybe so," she said, "but I have never looked delightful to me until recently. I don't understand it. Yesterday, a bold young man turned to look at me. They always used to hurry by, shading their eyes. This one *winked* at me, however. It caught me so by surprise, I actually smiled at him."

A few weeks later, I met her husband, Octavius, at a restaurant, where I was studying the menu in the window. Since he was about to enter it

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to order a meal, it was the work of a moment for him to invite me to join him and the work of half another moment for me to accept.

"You look unhappy, Octavius," I said.

"I *am* unhappy," he said. "I don't know what's got into Maggie lately. She seems so distracted that she doesn't notice me half the time. She wants to be constantly socializing. And yesterday—" A look of such woebegone misery suffused his face that almost anyone would have been ashamed of laughing at it.

"Yesterday?" I said. "What of yesterday?"

"Yesterday she asked me to call her—Melisande. I can't call Maggie a ridiculous name like Melisande."

"Why not? It's her baptismal name."

"But she's my Maggie. Melisande is some stranger."

"Well, she has changed a bit," I said. "Haven't you noticed that she looks more beautiful these days?"

"Yes," said Octavius, biting off the word.

"Isn't that a good thing?"

"No," he said, more sharply still. "I want my plain, funny-looking Maggie. This new Melisande is always fixing her hair, and putting on different shades of eye-shadow, and trying on new clothes and bigger bras, and hardly ever talking to me."

The lunch ended in a dejected silence on his part.

I thought I had better see Maggie and have a good talk with her.

"Maggie," I said.

"Please call me Melisande," she said.

"Melisande," I said. "It seems to me that Octavius is unhappy."

"Well, so am I," she said, tartly. "Octavius is getting to be such a bore. He won't go out. He won't have fun. He objects to my clothes, my makeup. Who on earth does he think he is?"

"You used to think he was a king among men."

"The more fool, I. He's just an ugly little fellow I'm embarrassed to be seen with."

"You wanted to be beautiful just for him."

"What do you mean *wanted* to be beautiful. I *am* beautiful. I was always beautiful. It was just a matter of developing a good hair-style and knowing how to fix my makeup just right. I can't let Octavius stand in my way."

And she didn't. Half a year later, she and Octavius were divorced and in another half-year Maggie—or Melisande—was married again to a man of superficial good looks and unworthy character. I once dined with him and he hesitated so long at picking up the check, I was afraid I might have to pick it up myself.

I saw Octavius about a year after his divorce. He, of course, had not

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re-married, for he was as odd-looking as ever and milk still curdled in his presence. We were sitting in his apartment which was filled with photos of Maggie, the old Maggie, each one more atrocious than the next.

"You must still be missing her, Octavius," I said.

"Dreadfully!" he replied. "I can only hope she is happy."

"I understand she isn't," I said. "She may come back to you."

Sadly, he shook his head. "Maggie can never come back to me. A woman named Melisande may wish to come back but I couldn't accept her if she did. She isn't Maggie—my lovely Maggie."

"Melisande," I said, "is more beautiful than Maggie."

He stared at me for a long time. "In whose eyes," he said. "Certainly, not in mine."

It was the last time I saw either.

I sat for a moment in silence, then I said, "You amaze me, George. I was actually touched."

It was a poor choice of words. George said, "That reminds me, old fellow—could I touch you for five dollars for about a week, ten days tops?"

I reached for a five-dollar bill, hesitated, then said, "Here! The story is worth it. It's a gift. It's yours." (Why not? All loans to George are gifts *de facto*.)

George took the bill without comment and put it in his well-worn wallet. (It must have been well-worn when he bought it, for he never uses it.) He said, "To get back to the subject. Could I touch you for five dollars for about a week, ten days tops?"

I said, "But you *have* five dollars."

"That is *my* money," said George, "and no business of yours. Do I comment on the state of your finances when you borrow money from me?"

"But I have never—" I began, then sighed and handed over five dollars more. ●

A TRIVIAL MATTER

To
a neutrino
the rest of the universe
is immaterial.

—Peter Payack

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and as inventive as *Neuromancer*,
and is sure to stir up as much excitement.

A word of warning:
This story contains strong
language which may be disturbing to some.

COUNT ZERO

Part One of Three

by William Gibson

art: J.K. Potter

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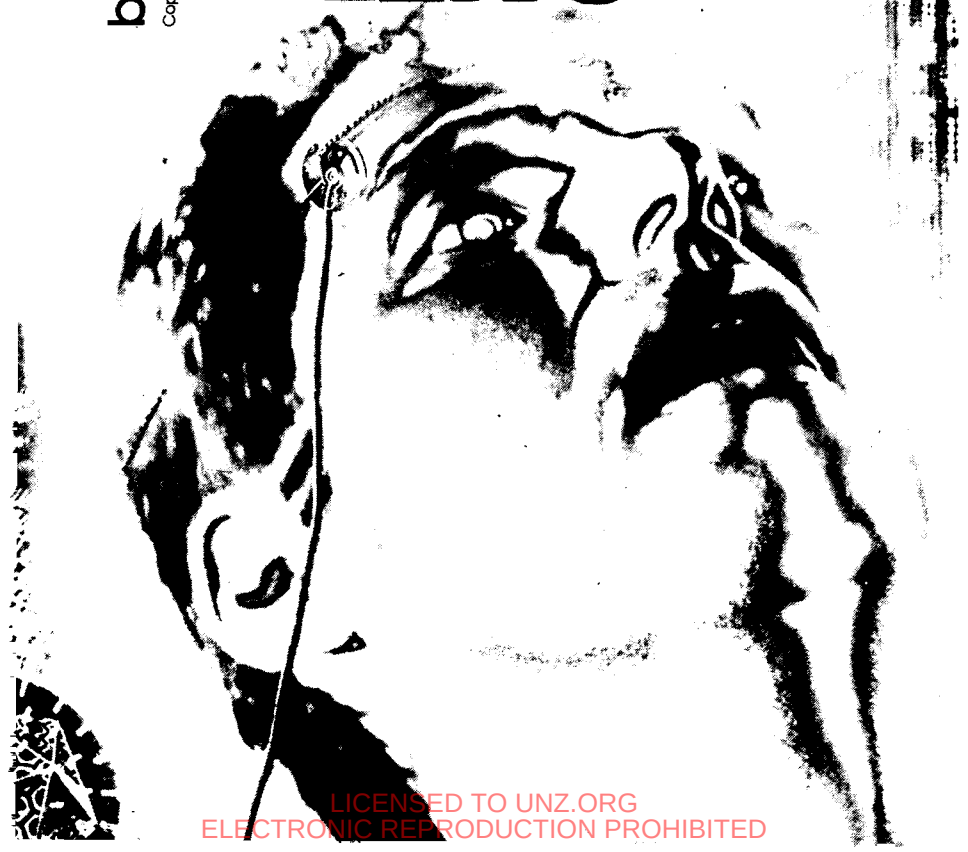

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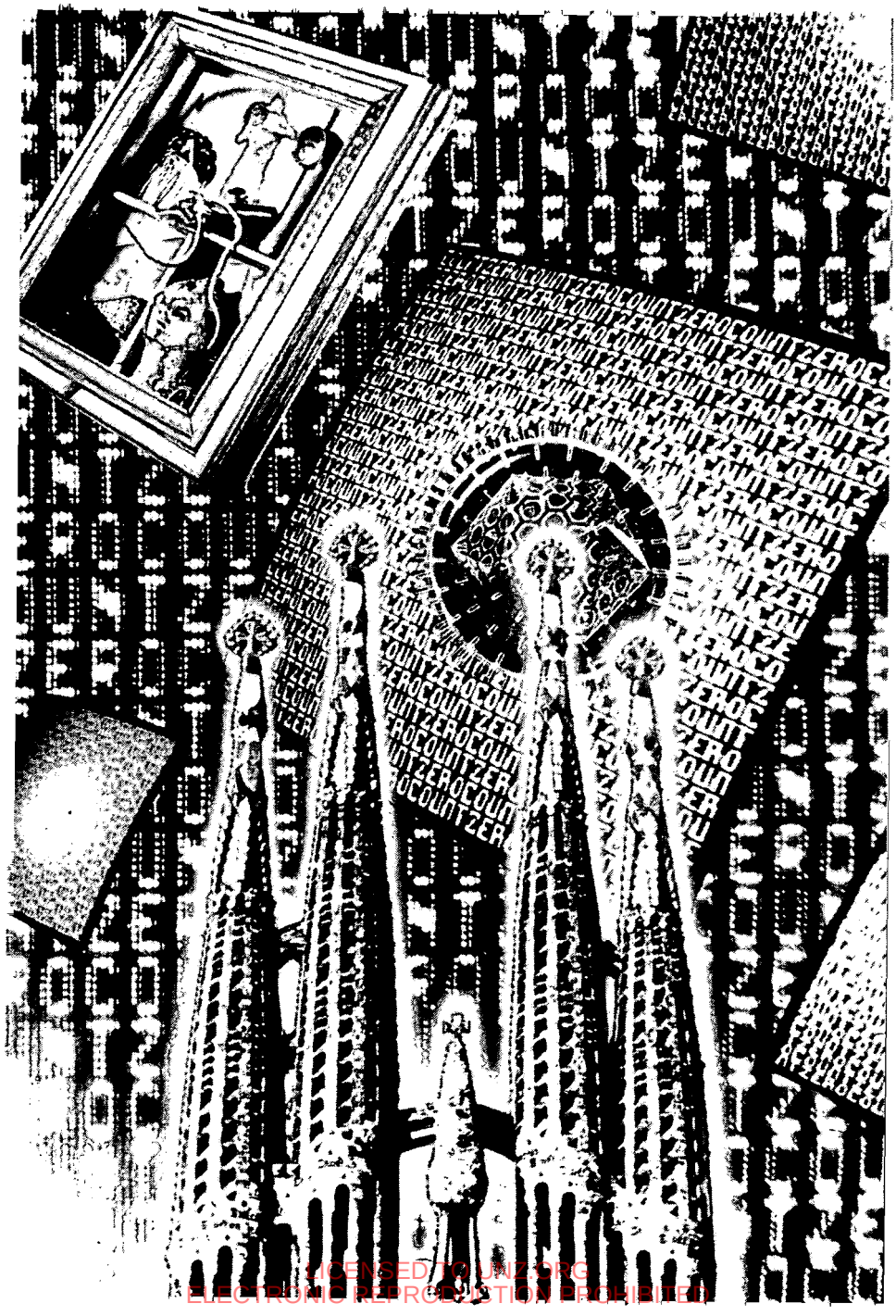
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1
SMOOTH RUNNING GUN

They set a slamhound on Turner's trail in New Delhi, slotted it to his pheromones and the color of his hair. It caught up with him on a street called Chandni Chauk and came scrambling for his rented BMW through a forest of bare brown legs and pedicab tires. Its core was a kilogram of recrystallized hexogene and flaked TNT.

He didn't see it coming. The last he saw of India was the pink stucco facade of a place called the Khush-Oil Hotel.

Because he had a good agent, he had a good contract. Because he had a good contract, he was in Singapore an hour after the explosion. Most of him, anyway. The Dutch surgeon liked to joke about that, how an unspecified percentage of Turner hadn't made it out of Palam International on that first flight, and had to spend the night there in a shed, in a support vat.

It took the Dutchman and his team three months to put Turner together again. They cloned a square meter of skin for him, grew it on slabs of collagen and shark-cartilage polysaccharides. They bought eyes and genitals on the open market. The eyes were green.

He spent most of those three months in a ROM-generated simstim construct of an idealized New England boyhood of the previous century. The Dutchman's visits were gray dawn dreams, nightmares that faded as the sky lightened beyond his second-floor bedroom window. You could smell the lilacs, late at night. He read Conan Doyle by the light of a sixty-watt bulb behind a parchment shade printed with clipper ships. He masturbated in the smell of clean cotton sheets and thought about cheerleaders. The Dutchman opened a door in his back brain and came strolling in to ask questions, but in the morning his mother called him down to Wheaties, eggs and bacon, coffee with milk and sugar.

And one morning he woke in a strange bed, the Dutchman standing beside a window spilling tropical green and a sunlight that hurt his eyes. "You can go home now, Turner. We're done with you. You're good as new."

He was good as new. How good was that? He didn't know. He took the things the Dutchman gave him and flew out of Singapore. Home was the next airport Hyatt.

And the next. And ever was.

He flew on. His credit chip was a rectangle of black mirror, edged with gold. People behind counters smiled when they saw it, nodded. Doors

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opened, closed behind him. Wheels left ferroconcrete, drinks arrived, dinner was served.

In Heathrow a vast chunk of memory detached itself from a blank bowl of airport sky and fell on him. He vomited into a blue plastic cannister without breaking stride. When he arrived at the counter at the end of the corridor, he changed his ticket.

He flew to Mexico.

And woke to the rattle of steel buckets on tile, wet swish of brooms, a woman's body warm against his own.

The room was a tall cave. Bare white plaster reflected sound with too much clarity; somewhere beyond the clatter of the maids in the morning courtyard was the pounding of surf. The sheets bunched between his fingers were coarse chambray, softened by countless washings.

He remembered sunlight through a broad expanse of tinted window. An airport bar, Puerto Vallarta. He'd had to walk twenty meters from the plane, eyes screwed shut against the sun. He remembered a dead bat pressed flat as a dry leaf on runway concrete.

He remembered riding a bus, a mountain road and the reek of internal combustion, the borders of the windshield plastered with postcard holograms of blue and pink saints. He'd ignored the steep scenery in favor of a sphere of pink lucite and the jittery dance of mercury at its core. The knob crowned the bent steel stem of the transmission lever, slightly larger than a baseball. It had been cast around a crouching spider blown from clear glass, hollow, half filled with quicksilver. Mercury jumped and slid when the driver slapped the bus through switchback curves, swayed and shivered in the straightaways. The knob was ridiculous, handmade, baleful; it was there to welcome him back to Mexico.

Among the dozen-odd microsofts the Dutchman had given him was one that would allow a limited fluency in Spanish, but in Vallarta he'd fumbled behind his left ear and inserted a dustplug instead, hiding the socket and plug beneath a square of fleshtone micropore. A passenger near the back of the bus had a radio. A voice had periodically interrupted the brassy pop to recite a kind of litany, strings of ten-digit figures, the day's winning numbers in the national lottery.

The woman beside him stirred in her sleep.

He raised himself on one elbow to look at her. A stranger's face, but not the one his life in hotels had taught him to expect. He would have expected a routine beauty, bred out of cheap elective surgery and the relentless Darwinism of fashion, an archetype cooked down from the major media faces of the previous five years.

Something Midwestern in the bone of the jaw, archaic and American. The blue sheets were rucked across her hips, sunlight angling in through

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hardwood louvers to stripe her long thighs with diagonals of gold. The faces he woke with in the world's hotels were like God's own hood ornaments. Women's sleeping faces, identical and alone, naked, aimed straight out to the void. But this one was different. Already, somehow, there was meaning attached to it. Meaning and a name.

He sat up, swinging his legs off the bed. His soles registered the grit of beach-sand on cool tile. There was a faint, pervasive smell of insecticide. Naked, head throbbing, he stood. He made his legs move. Walked, tried the first of two doors, finding white tile, more white plaster, a bulbous chrome showerhead hung from rust-spotted iron pipe. The sink's taps offered identical trickles of bloodwarm water. An antique wristwatch lay beside a plastic tumbler, a mechanical Rolex on a pale leather strap.

The bathroom's shuttered windows were unglazed, strung with a fine green mesh of plastic. He peered out between hardwood slats, wincing at the hot clean sun, and saw a dry fountain of flower-painted tiles and the rusted carcass of a VW Rabbit.

Allison. That was her name.

She wore frayed khaki shorts and one of his white T-shirts. Her legs were very brown. The clockwork Rolex, with its dull stainless case, went around her left wrist on its pigskin strap. They went walking, down the curve of beach, toward Barre de Navidad. They kept to the narrow strip of firm wet sand above the line of surf.

Already they had a history together; he remembered her at a stall that morning in the little town's iron-roofed mercado, how she'd held the huge clay mug of boiled coffee in both hands. Mopping eggs and salsa from the cracked white plate with a tortilla, he'd watched flies circling fingers of sunlight that found their way through a patchwork of palmfrond and corrugated siding. Some talk about her job with some legal firm in L.A., how she lived alone in one of the ramshackle pontoon towns tethered off Redondo. He'd told her he was in personnel. Or had been, anyway. "Maybe I'm looking for a new line of work . . ."

But talk seemed secondary to what there was between them, and now a frigate bird hung overhead, tacking against the breeze, slid sideways, wheeled, and was gone. They both shivered with the freedom of it, the mindless glide of the thing. She squeezed his hand.

A blue figure came marching up the beach toward them, a military policeman headed for town, spitshined black boots unreal against the soft bright beach. As the man passed, his face dark and immobile beneath mirrored glasses, Turner noted the carbine-format Steiner-Optic laser with Fabrique Nationale sights. The blue fatigues were spotless, creased like knives.

Turner had been a soldier in his own right, for most of his adult life,

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although he'd never worn a uniform. A mercenary, his employers vast corporations warring covertly for the control of entire economies. He was a specialist in the extraction of top executives and research people. The multinationals he worked for would never admit that men like Turner existed. . . .

"You worked your way through most of a bottle of Herradura last night," she said.

He nodded. Her hand, in his, was warm and dry. He was watching the spread of her toes with each step, the nails painted with chipped pink gloss.

The breakers rolled in, their edges transparent as green glass.

The spray beaded on her tan.

After their first day together, life fell into a simple pattern. They had breakfast in the mercado, at a stall with a concrete counter worn smooth as polished marble. They spent the morning swimming, until the sun drove them back into the shuttered coolness of the hotel, where they made love under the slow wooden blades of the ceiling fan, then slept. In the afternoon they explored the maze of narrow streets behind the Avenida, or went hiking in the hills. They dined in beachfront restaurants, and drank on the patios of the white hotels. Moonlight curled in the edge of the surf.

And, gradually, without words, she taught him a different style of passion. Brown gloss of her body against the blue chambray, the geometry of her limbs in the bright stripes of sunlight, the smell and the taste of her, lying, mouths together, afterward, breathing, still embracing. He'd become accustomed, years before, to the anonymous service of professionals, but Allison insisted somehow on remaining Allison, always, and the nearly forgotten pain and joy of human recognition pooled gradually in him, grew and spread in the white room, her breath on his neck and his hands cupping her breasts . . .

But sometimes, after, he wanted to talk, long spirals of unfocused narrative that seemed to spin out and join the sound of the sea. And she said very little, so that he came to value what little she did say. And, always, she held him. And listened.

A week passed, then another. He woke to their final day together in that same cool room, finding her beside him. Over breakfast he imagined he felt a change in her, a tension.

They sunbathed, swam, and in the familiar bed he forgot the faint edge of anxiety.

In the afternoon, she suggested they walk down the beach, toward Barre, the way they'd gone that first morning.

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Turner extracted the dustplug from the socket behind his ear and inserted a sliver of microsoft. The structure of Spanish settled through him like a tower of glass, invisible gates hinged on present and future, conditional, preterite perfect. Leaving her in the room, he crossed the Avenida and entered the market. He bought a straw basket, cans of cold beer, sandwiches and fruit. On his way back, he bought a new pair of sunglasses from the vendor in the Avenida.

His tan was dark and even. The angular patchwork left by the Dutchman's grafts were gone, and she had taught him the unity of his body. Mornings, when he met the green eyes in the bathroom mirror, they were his own, and the Dutchman no longer troubled his dreams with bad jokes and a dry cough. Sometimes, still, he dreamed fragments of India, a country he barely knew, bright splinters, Chandni Chauk, the smell of dust and fried breads . . .

The walls of the ruined hotel stood a quarter of the way down the bay's arc. The surf here was stronger, each wave a detonation.

Now she tugged him toward it, something new at the corners of her eyes, a tightness. Gulls scattered, as they came hand in hand up the beach to gaze into shadow beyond empty doorways. The sand had subsided, allowing the structure's facade to cave in, walls gone, leaving the floors of the three levels hung like huge shingles from bent, rusted tendons of finger-thick steel, each one faced with a different color and pattern of tile.

HOTEL PLAYA DEL M was worked in childlike seashell capitals above one concrete arch. "Mar," he said, completing it, though he'd removed the microsoft.

"It's over," she said, stepping beneath the arch, into shadow.

"What's over?" He followed, the straw basket rubbing against his hip. The sand here was cold, dry, loose between his toes.

"Over. Done with. This place. No time here, no future."

He stared at her, glanced past her to where rusted bedsprings were tangled at the junction of two crumbling walls. "It smells like piss," he said. "Let's swim."

The sea took the chill away, but a distance hung between them now. They sat on a blanket from Turner's room and ate, silently. The shadow of the ruin lengthened. The wind moved her sunstreaked hair.

"You make me think about horses," he said, finally.

"Well," she said, as though she spoke from depths of exhaustion, "they've only been extinct for thirty years."

"No," he said, "their hair. The hair on their necks, when they ran."

"Manes," she said, and there were tears in her eyes. "Damn it." Her

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shoulders began to heave. She took a deep breath. She tossed her empty Carta Blanca can down the beach. "It, me, what does it matter?" Her arms around him again. "Oh, come on, Turner. Come on."

And as she lay back, pulling him with her, he noticed something, a boat, reduced by distance to a white hyphen, where the water met the sky.

When he sat up, pulling on his cut-off jeans, he saw the yacht. It was much closer now, a graceful sweep of white riding low in the water. Deep water. The beach must fall away almost vertically, here, judging by the strength of the surf. That would be why the line of hotels ended where it did, back along the beach, and why the ruin hadn't survived. The waves had licked away its foundation.

"Give me the basket."

She was buttoning her blouse. He'd bought it for her in one of the tired little shops along the Avenida. Electric blue Mexican cotton, badly made. The clothing they bought in the shops seldom lasted more than a day or two. "I said give me the basket."

She did. He dug through the remains of their afternoon, finding his binoculars beneath a plastic bag of pineapple slices drenched in lime and dusted with cayenne. He pulled them out, a compact pair of 6 × 30 combat glasses. He snapped the integral covers from the objectives and the padded eyepieces and studied the streamlined ideograms of the Hosaka logo. A yellow inflatable rounded the stern and swung toward the beach.

"Turner, I—"

"Get up." Bundling the blanket and her towel into the basket. He took a last warm can of Carta Blanca from the basket and put it beside the binoculars. He stood, pulling her quickly to her feet, and forced the basket into her hands. "Maybe I'm wrong," he said. "If I am, get out of here. Cut for that second stand of palms." He pointed. "Don't go back to the hotel. Get on a bus, Manzanillo or Vallarta. Go home." He could hear the purr of the outboard now.

He saw the tears start, but she made no sound at all as she turned and ran, up past the ruin, clutching the basket, stumbling in a drift of sand. She didn't look back. He turned, then, and looked toward the yacht. The inflatable was bouncing through the surf. The yacht was named *Tsushima,* and he'd last seen her on Hiroshima Bay. He'd seen the red Shinto gate at Itsukushima from her deck.

He didn't need the glasses to know that the inflatable's passenger would be Conroy, the pilot one of Hosaka's ninjas. He sat down cross-legged in the cooling sand and opened his last can of Mexican beer.

He looked back at the line of white hotels, his hands inert on one of

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Tsushima's teak railings. Behind the hotels, the little town's three holograms glowed: Banamex, Aeronaves, and the cathedral's six-meter Virgin.

Conroy stood beside him. "Crash job," Conroy said. "You know how it is." Conroy's voice was flat and uninflected, as though he'd modeled it after a cheap voice-chip. His face was broad and white, dead white. His eyes were dark-ringed and hooded beneath a peroxide thatch combed back from a wide forehead. He wore a black polo shirt and black slacks. "Inside," he said, turning. Turner followed, ducking to enter the cabin door. White screens, pale flawless pine, Tokyo's austere corporate chic.

Conroy settled himself on a low, rectangular cushion of slate-gray ultrasuede. Turner stood, his hands slack at his sides. Conroy took a knurled silver inhaler from the low enamel table between them. "Choline enhancer?"

"No."

Conroy jammed the inhaler into one nostril and snorted. "You want some sushi?" He put the inhaler back on the table. "We caught a couple of red snappers about an hour ago."

Turner stood where he was, staring at Conroy.

"Christopher Mitchell," Conroy said. "Maas Biolabs. Their head hybridoma man. He's coming over to Hosaka."

"Never heard of him."

"Bullshit. How about a drink?"

Turner shook his head.

"Silicon's on the way out, Turner. Mitchell's the man who made biochips work, and Maas is sitting on the major patents. You know that. He's the man for monoclonals. He wants out. You and me, Turner, we're going to shift him."

"I think I'm retired, Conroy. I was having a good time, back there."

"That's what the psych team in Tokyo say. I mean, it's not exactly your first time out of the box, is it? She's a field psychologist, on retainer to Hosaka."

A muscle in Turner's thigh began to jump.

"They say you're ready, Turner. They were a little worried, after Delhi, so they wanted to check it out. Little therapy on the side. Never hurts, does it?"

2
MARLY

She'd worn her best for the interview, but it was raining in Brussels

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and she had no money for a cab. She walked from the Eurotrans station.

Her hand, in the pocket of her good jacket—a Sally Stanley but almost a year old—was a white knot around the crumpled telefax. She no longer needed it, having memorized the address, but it seemed she could no more release it than break the trance that held her here now, staring into the window of an expensive shop that sold menswear, her focus phasing between sedate flannel dress shirts and the reflection of her own dark eyes.

Surely the eyes alone would be enough to cost her the job. No need for the wet hair she now wished she'd let Andrea cut. The eyes displayed a pain and an inertia that anyone could read, and most certainly these things would soon be revealed to Herr Josef Virek, least likely of potential employers.

When the telefax had been delivered, she'd insisted on regarding it as some cruel prank, another nuisance call. She'd had enough of those, thanks to the media, so many that Andrea had ordered a special program for the apartment's phone, one that filtered out incoming calls from any number that wasn't listed in her permanent directory. But that, Andrea had insisted, must have been the reason for the telefax. How else could anyone reach her?

But Marly had shaken her head and huddled deeper into Andrea's old terry robe. Why would Virek, enormously wealthy, collector and patron, wish to hire the disgraced former operator of a tiny Paris gallery?

Then it had been Andrea's time for head-shaking, in her impatience with the new, the *disgraced* Marly Krushkhova, who spent entire days in the apartment now, who sometimes didn't bother to dress. The attempted sale, in Paris, of a single forgery, was hardly the novelty Marly imagined it to have been, she said. If the press hadn't been quite so anxious to show up the disgusting Gnass for the fool he most assuredly was, she continued, the business would hardly have been news. Gnass was wealthy enough, gross enough, to make for a weekend's scandal. Andrea smiled. "If you had been less attractive, you would have gotten far less attention." Marly shook her head. "And the forgery was Alain's. You were innocent. Have you forgotten that?" Marly went into the bathroom, still huddled in the threadbare robe, without answering.

Beneath her friend's wish to comfort, to help, Marly could already sense the impatience of someone forced to share a very small space with an unhappy, nonpaying guest.

And Andrea had had to loan her the fare for the Eurotrans.

With a conscious, painful effort of will, she broke from the circle of her thoughts and merged with the dense but sedate flow of serious Belgian shoppers.

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A girl in bright tights and a boyfriend's oversized loden jacket brushed past, scrubbed and smiling. At the next intersection, Marly noticed an outlet for a fashion line she'd favored in her own student days. The clothes looked impossibly young.

In her white and secret fist, the telefax.

Gallerie Duperey, 14 Rue au Beurre, Bruxelles.

Josef Virek.

The receptionist in the cool gray anteroom of the Gallerie Duperey might well have grown there, a lovely and likely poisonous plant, rooted behind a slab of polished marble inlaid with an enameled keyboard. She raised lustrous eyes as Marly approached. Marly imagined the click and whirr of shutters, her bedraggled image whisked away to some far corner of Josef Virek's empire.

"Marly Krushkhova," she said, fighting the urge to produce the compacted wad of telefax, smooth it pathetically on the cool and flawless marble. "For Herr Virek."

"Fraulein Krushkhova," the receptionist said, "Herr Virek is unable to be in Brussels today."

Marly stared at the perfect lips, simultaneously aware of the pain the words caused her and the sharp pleasure she was learning to take in disappointment. "I see."

"However, he has chosen to conduct the interview via a sensory link. If you will please enter the third door on your left . . ."

The room was bare and white. On two walls hung unframed sheets of what looked like rain-stained cardboard, stabbed through repeatedly with a variety of instruments. *Katatonenkunst.* Conservative. The sort of work one sold to committees sent round by the boards of Dutch commercial banks.

She sat down on a low bench covered in leather and finally allowed herself to release the telefax. She was alone, but assumed that she was being observed somehow.

"Fraulein Krushkhova." A young man in a technician's dark green smock stood in the doorway opposite the one through which she'd entered. "In a moment, please, you will cross the room and step through this door. Please grasp the knob slowly, firmly, and in a manner that affords maximum contact with the flesh of your palm. Step through carefully. There should be a minimum of spatial disorientation."

She blinked at him. "I beg—"

"The sensory link," he said, and withdrew, the door closing behind him.

She rose, tried to tug some shape into the damp lapels of her jacket,

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touched her hair, thought better of it, took a deep breath, and crossed to the door. The receptionist's phrase had prepared her for the only kind of link she knew, a simstim signal routed via Bell Europa. She'd assumed she'd wear a helmet studded with dermatrodes; that Virek would use a passive viewer as a human camera.

But Virek's wealth was on another scale of magnitude entirely.

As her fingers closed around the cool brass knob, it seemed to squirm, sliding along a touch-spectrum of texture and temperature in the first second of contact.

Then it became metal again, green-painted iron, sweeping out and down, along a line of perspective, an old railing she grasped now in wonder.

A few drops of rain blew into her face.

Smell of rain and wet earth.

A confusion of small details, her own memory of a drunken artschool picnic warring with the perfection of Virek's illusion.

Below her lay the unmistakable panorama of Barcelona, smoke hazing the strange spires of the Church of the Sagrada Familia. She caught the railing with her other hand as well, fighting vertigo. She knew this place. She was in Güell Park, Antonio Gaudí's tatty fairyland, on its barren rise behind the center of the city. To her left, a giant lizard of crazy-quilt ceramic was frozen in mid-slide down a ramp of rough stone. Its fountain-grin watered a bed of tired flowers.

"You are disoriented. Please forgive me."

Josef Virek was perched below her on one of the park's serpentine benches, his wide shoulders hunched in a soft topcoat.

His features had been vaguely familiar to her all her life. Now she remembered, for some reason, a photograph of Virek and the King of England. He smiled at her. His head was large and beautifully shaped beneath a brush of stiff, dark gray hair. His nostrils were permanently flared, as though he sniffed invisible winds of art and commerce. His eyes, very large behind the round, rimless glasses that were a trademark, were pale blue and strangely soft.

"Please." He patted the bench's random mosaic of shattered pottery with a narrow hand. "You must forgive my reliance on technology. I have been confined for over a decade to a vat. In some hideous industrial suburb of Stockholm. Or perhaps of hell. I am not a well man, Marly. Sit beside me."

Taking a deep breath, she descended the stone steps and crossed the cobbles. "Herr Virek," she said, "I saw you lecture in Munich, two years ago. A critique of Faessler and his *autistiches Theater*. You seemed well then . . ."

"Faessler?" Virek's tanned forehead wrinkled. "You saw a double. A

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hologram perhaps. Many things, Marly, are perpetrated in my name. Aspects of my wealth have become autonomous, by degrees; at times they even war with one another. Rebellion in the fiscal extremities. However, for reasons so complex as to be entirely occult, the fact of my illness has never been made public . . ."

She took her place beside him and peered down at the dirty pavement between the scuffed toes of her black Paris boots. She saw a chip of pale gravel, a rusted paperclip, the small dusty corpse of a bee or hornet. "It's amazingly detailed . . ."

"Yes," he said, "the new Maas biochips. You should know," he continued, "that what I know of your private life is very nearly as detailed. More than you yourself do, in some instances."

"You do?" It was easiest, she found, to focus on the city, picking out landmarks remembered from a half-dozen student holidays. There, just there, would be the Ramblas, parrots and flowers, the taverns serving dark beer and squid.

"Yes. I know that it was your lover who convinced you that you had found a lost Cornell original . . ."

Marly shut her eyes.

"He commissioned the forgery, hiring two talented student-artisans and an established historian who found himself in certain personal difficulties. . . . He paid them with money he'd already extracted from your gallery, as you have no doubt guessed. You are crying . . ."

Marly nodded. A cool forefinger tapped her wrist.

"I bought Gnass. I bought the police off the case. The press weren't worth buying; they rarely are. And now, perhaps, your slight notoriety may work to your advantage."

"Herr Virek, I . . ."

"A moment, please. Paco! Come here, child."

Marly opened her eyes and saw a child of perhaps six years, tightly gotten up in dark suitcoat and knickers, pale stockings, high-buttoned black patent boots. Brown hair fell across his forehead in a smooth wing. He held something in his hands, a box of some kind.

"Gaudí began the park in 1900," Virek said. "Paco wears the period costume. Come here, child. Show us your marvel."

"Señor," Paco lisped, bowing, and stepped forward to exhibit the thing he held.

Marly stared. Box of plain wood, glass-fronted. Objects . . .

"Cornell," she said, her tears forgotten. "Cornell?" She turned to Virek.

"Of course not. The object set into that length of bone is a Braun biomonitor. This is the work of a living artist."

"There are more? More boxes?"

"I have found seven. Over a period of three years. The Virek Collection,

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you see, is a sort of black hole. The unnatural density of my wealth drags irresistibly at the rarest works of the human spirit. An autonomous process, and one I ordinarily take little interest in . . ."

But Marly was lost in the box, in its evocation of impossible distances, of loss and yearning. It was somber, gentle, and somehow childlike. It contained seven objects.

The slender fluted bone, surely formed for flight, surely from the wing of some large bird. Three archaic circuit-boards, faced with mazes of gold. A smooth white sphere of baked clay. An age-blackened fragment of lace. A finger-length segment of what she assumed was bone from a human wrist, grayish white, inset smoothly with the silicon shaft of a small instrument that must have ridden flush with the surface of the skin—but the thing's face was seared and blackened.

The box was a universe, a poem, frozen on the boundaries of human experience.

"Gracias, Paco . . ."

Box and boy were gone.

She gaped.

"Ah. Forgive me, I have forgotten that these transitions are too abrupt for you. Now, however, we must discuss your assignment . . ."

"Herr Virek," she said, "what is 'Paco'?"

"A sub-program."

"I see."

"I have hired you to find the maker of the box."

"But, Herr Virek, with your resources . . ."

"Of which you are now one, child. Do you not wish to be employed? When the business of Gnass having been stung with a forged Cornell came to my attention, I saw that you might be of use in this matter." He shrugged. "Credit me with a certain talent for obtaining desired results."

"Certainly, Herr Virek! And, yes, I do wish to work!"

"Very well. You will be paid a salary. You will be given access to certain lines of credit, although, should you need to purchase, let us say, substantial amounts of real estate . . ."

"Real estate?"

"Or a corporation, or spacecraft. In that event, you will require my indirect authorization. Which you will almost certainly be given. Otherwise, you will have a free hand. I suggest, however, that you work in a scale with which you yourself are comfortable. Otherwise, you run the risk of losing touch with your intuition, and intuition, in a case such as this, is of crucial importance." The famous smile glittered for her once more.

She took a deep breath. "Herr Virek, what if I fail? How long do I have, to locate this artist?"

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"The rest of your life," he said.

"Forgive me," she found herself saying, to her horror, "but I understood you to say that you live in a, a vat?"

"Yes, Marly. And from that rather terminal perspective, I should advise you to strive to live hourly in your own flesh. Not in the past, if you understand me. I speak as one who can no longer tolerate that simple state, the cells of my body having opted for the quixotic pursuit of individual careers. I imagine that a more fortunate man, or a poorer one, would have been allowed to die at last, or be coded at the core of some bit of hardware. But I seem constrained, by the byzantine net of circumstance that requires, I understand, something like a tenth of my annual income. Making me, I suppose, the world's most expensive invalid. I was touched, Marly, at your affairs of the heart. I envy you the ordered flesh from which they unfold."

And, for an instant, she stared directly into those soft blue eyes and knew, with an instinctive mammalian certainty, that the exceedingly rich were no longer even remotely human.

A wing of night swept Barcelona's sky, like the twitch of a vast slow shutter, and Virek and the Parque Güell were gone, and she found herself seated again on the low leather bench, staring at torn sheets of stained cardboard.

3
BOBBY PULLS A WILSON

It was such an easy thing, death. He saw that now: it just happened. You screwed up by a fraction and there it was, something chill and odorless, ballooning out from the four stupid corners of the room, your mother's Barrytown living room.

Shit, he thought, *Two-a-Day'll laugh his ass off, first time out and I pull a wilson.*

The only sound in the room was the faint steady burr of his teeth vibrating, supersonic palsy as the feedback ate into his nervous system. He watched his frozen hand as it trembled delicately, centimeters from the red plastic stud that could break the connection that was killing him.

Shit.

He'd come home and gotten right down to it, slotted the icebreaker he'd rented from Two-a-Day and jacked in, punching for the base he'd chosen as his first live target. Figured that was the way to do it; you wanna do it, then *do* it. He'd only had the little Ono-Sendai deck for a month, but he already knew he wanted to be more than just some Barrytown hotdogger. Bobby Newmark, aka Count Zero, but it was already

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over. Shows never ended this way, not right at the beginning. In a show, the cowboy hero's girl or maybe his partner would run in, slap the trodes off, hit that little red OFF stud. So you'd make it, make it through.

But Bobby was alone now, his autonomic nervous system overridden by the defenses of a database three thousand kilometers from Barrytown, and he knew it.

There was some magic chemistry in that impending darkness, something that let him glimpse the infinite desirability of that room, with its carpet-colored carpet and curtain-colored curtains, its dingy foam sofa-suite, the angular chrome frame supporting the components of a six-year-old Hitachi entertainment module.

He'd carefully closed those curtains in preparation for his run, but now, somehow, he seemed to see out anyway, where the condos of Barrytown crested back in their concrete wave to break against the darker towers of the Projects. That condo-wave bristled with a fine insect fur of antennas and chickenwired dishes, strung with lines of drying clothes. His mother liked to bitch about that; she had a dryer. He remembered her knuckles white on the imitation bronze of the balcony railing, dry wrinkles where her wrist was bent. He remembered a dead boy carried out of Big Playground on an alloy stretcher, bundled in plastic the same color as a cop car. Fell and hit his head. Fell. Head. Wilson.

His heart stopped. It seemed to him that it fell sideways, kicked like an animal in a cartoon.

Sixteenth second of Bobby Newmark's death. His hotdogger's death.

And something *leaned in*, vastness unutterable, from beyond the most distant edge of anything he'd ever known or imagined, and touched him.

: : : WHAT ARE YOU DOING? WHY ARE THEY DOING THAT TO YOU?

Girlvoice, brownhair, darkeyes—

: KILLING ME KILLING ME GET IT OFF GET IT OFF.

Darkeyes, desertstar, tanshirt, girlhair—

: : : BUT IT'S A TRICK, SEE? YOU ONLY THINK IT'S GOT YOU. LOOK. NOW I FIT HERE AND YOU AREN'T CARRYING THE LOOP . . .

And his heart rolled right over, on its back, and kicked his lunch up with its red cartoon legs, galvanic frogleg spasm hurling him from the chair and tearing the trodes from his forehead. His bladder let go when his head clipped the corner of the Hitachi, and someone was saying fuck fuck fuck into the dust smell of carpet. Girlvoice gone, no desertstar, flash impression of cool wind and waterworn stone . . .

Then his head exploded. He saw it very clearly, from somewhere far away. Like a phosphorus grenade.

White.

Light.

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4
CLOCKING IN

The black Honda hovered twenty meters above the octagonal deck of the derelict oil rig. It was nearing dawn, and Turner could make out the faded outline of a biohazard trefoil marking the helicopter pad.

"You got a biohazard down there, Conroy?"

"None you aren't used to," Conroy said.

A figure in a red jumpsuit made brisk arm-signals to the Honda's pilot. Propwash flung scraps of packing-waste into the sea as they landed. Conroy slapped the release plate on his harness and leaned across Turner to unseal the hatch. The roar of the engines battered them as the hatch slid open. Conroy was jabbing him in the shoulder, making urgent lifting motions with an upturned palm. He pointed to the pilot.

Turner scrambled out and dropped, the prop a blur of thunder, then Conroy was crouching beside him. They cleared the faded trefoil with the bent-legged crab-scuttle common to helicopter pads, the Honda's wind snapping their pantlegs around their ankles.

Turner carried a plain gray suitcase molded from ballistic ABS, his only piece of luggage; someone had packed it for him, at the hotel, and it had been waiting on *Tsushima*. A sudden change in pitch told him the Honda was rising. It went whining away toward the coast, showing no lights. As the sound faded, Turner heard the cries of gulls and the slap and slide of the Pacific.

"Someone tried to set up a data haven here, once," Conroy said. "International waters. Back then nobody lived in orbit, so it made sense for a few years . . ." He started for a rusted forest of beams supporting the rig's superstructure. "One scenario Hosaka showed me, we'd get Mitchell out here, clean him up, stick him on *Tsushima,* and full steam for old Japan. I told 'em, forget *that* shit, Maas gets on to it and they can come down on this thing with anything they want. I told 'em, that compound they got down in the D.F., that's the ticket, right? Plenty of shit Maas wouldn't pull there, not in the middle of Mexico City . . ."

A figure stepped from the shadows, head distorted by the bulbous goggles of an image-amplification rig. It waved them on with the blunt, clustered muzzles of a Lansing flechette gun. "Biohazard," Conroy said, as they edged past. "Duck your head here. And watch it, the stairs get slippery."

The rig smelled of rust and disuse and brine. There were no windows. The discolored cream walls were blotched with spreading scabs of rust. Battery-powered fluorescent lanterns were slung, every few meters, from beams overhead, casting a hideous green-tinged light, at once intense

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and naggingly uneven. At least a dozen figures were at work, in this central room; they moved with the relaxed precision of good technicians. Professionals, Turner thought; their eyes seldom met and there was little talking. It was cold, very cold, and Conroy had given him a huge parka covered with tabs and zippers.

A bearded man in a sheepskin bomber jacket was securing bundled lengths of fiber-optic line to a dented bulkhead with silver tape. Conroy was locked in a whispered argument with a black woman who wore a parka like Turner's. The bearded tech looked up from his work and saw Turner. "Shee-it," he said, still on his knees, "I figured it was a big one, but I guess it's gonna be a rough one too." He stood, wiping his palms automatically on his jeans. Like the rest of the techs, he wore micropore surgical gloves. "You're Turner." He grinned, glanced quickly in Conroy's direction, and pulled a black plastic flask from the jacket pocket. "Take some chill off. You remember me. Worked on that job in Marrakech, IBM boy went over to Mitsu-G. Wired the charges on that bus you 'n' the Frenchman drove into the hotel lobby."

Turner took the flask, snapped its lid, and tipped it. Bourbon. It stung deep and sour, warmth spreading from the region of his sternum. "Thanks." He returned the flask and the man pocketed it.

"Oakey," the man said. "Name's Oakey? You remember?"

"Sure," Turner lied, "Marrakech."

"Wild Turkey," Oakey said. "Flew in through Schipol, I hit the duty-free. Your partner there," another glance at Conroy, "he's none too relaxed, is he? I mean, not like Marrakech, right?"

Turner nodded.

"You need anything," Oakey said, "lemme know."

"Like what?"

" 'Nother drink, or I got some Peruvian flake, the kind that's real yellow." Oakey grinned again.

"Thanks," Turner said, seeing Conroy turn from the black woman. Oakey saw too, kneeling quickly and tearing off a fresh length of silver tape.

"Who was that?" Conroy asked, after leading Turner through a narrow door with decayed black gasket-seals at its edges. Conroy spun the wheel that dogged the door shut; someone had oiled it recently.

"Name's Oakey," Turner said, taking in the new room. Smaller. Two of the lanterns. Folding tables, chairs, all new. On the tables, instrumentation of some kind, under black plastic dustcovers.

"Friend of yours?"

"No," Turner said. "He worked for me, once." He went to the nearest table and flipped back a dustcover. "What's this?" The console had the blank, half-finished look of a factory prototype.

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"Maas-Neotek cyberspace deck."

Turner raised his eyebrows. "Yours?"

"We got two. One's on site. From Hosaka. Fastest thing in the matrix, evidently, and Hosaka can't even de-engineer the chips to copy them. Whole other technology."

"They got them from Mitchell?"

"They aren't saying. The fact they'd let go of 'em just to give our jockeys an edge is some indication of how badly they want the man."

"Who's on console, Conroy?"

"Jaylene Slide. I was talking to her just now." He jerked his head in the direction of the door. "The site man's out of L.A., kid called Ramirez."

"They any good?" Turner replaced the dustcover.

"Better be, for what they'll cost. Jaylene's gotten herself a hot rep, the past two years, and Ramirez is her understudy. Shit," Conroy shrugged, "you know these cowboys. Fucking crazy . . ."

"Where'd you get them? Where'd you get Oakey, for that matter?"

Conroy smiled. "From *your* agent, Turner."

Turner stared at Conroy, then nodded. Turning, he lifted the edge of the next dustcover. Cases, plastic and styrofoam, stacked neatly on the cold metal of the table. He touched a blue plastic rectangle stamped with a silver monogram: S&W.

"Your agent," Conroy said, as Turner snapped the case open. The pistol lay there in its molded bed of pale blue foam, a massive revolver with an ugly housing that bulged beneath the squat barrel. "S&W Tactical, .408, with a xenon projector," Conroy said. "What he said you'd want."

Turner took the gun in his hand and thumbed the battery-test stud for the projector. A red LED in the walnut grip pulsed twice. He swung the cylinder out. "Ammunition?"

"On the table. Handloads, explosive tips."

Turner found a transparent cube of amber plastic, opened it with his left hand, and extracted a cartridge. "Why did they pick me for this, Conroy?" He examined the cartridge, then inserted it carefully into one of the cylinder's six chambers.

"I don't know," Conroy said. "Felt like they had you slotted from go, whenever they heard from Mitchell . . ."

Turner spun the cylinder rapidly and snapped it back into the frame. "I said, 'Why did they pick me for this, Conroy?' " He raised the pistol with both hands and extended his arms, pointing it directly at Conroy's face. "Gun like this, sometimes you can see right down the bore, if the light's right, see if there's a bullet there."

Conroy shook his head, very slightly.

"Or maybe you can see it in one of the other chambers . . ."

"No," Conroy said, very softly, "no way."

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"Maybe the shrinks screwed up, Conroy. How about that?"

"No," Conroy said, his face blank. "They didn't, and you won't."

Turner pulled the trigger. The hammer clicked on an empty chamber. Conroy blinked, once, opened his mouth, closed it, watched as Turner lowered the Smith & Wesson. A single bead of sweat rolled down from Conroy's hairline and lost itself in an eyebrow.

"Well?" Turner asked, the gun at his side.

Conroy shrugged. "Don't do that shit," he said.

"They want me that bad?"

Conroy nodded. "It's your show, Turner."

"Where's Mitchell?" He opened the cylinder again and began to load the five remaining chambers.

"Arizona. About fifty kilos from the Sonora line, in a mesa-top research arcology. Maas Biolabs North America. They own everything around there, right down to the border, and the mesa's smack in the middle of the footprints of four recon satellites. Mucho tight."

"And how are we supposed to get in?"

"We aren't. Mitchell's coming out, on his own. We wait for him, pick him up, get his ass to Hosaka intact." Conroy hooked a forefinger behind the open collar of his black shirt and drew out a length of black nylon cord, then a small black nylon envelope with a velcro fastener. He opened it carefully and extracted an object, which he offered to Turner on his open palm. "Here. This is what he sent."

Turner put the gun down on the nearest table and took the thing from Conroy. It was like a swollen gray microsoft, one end routine neuro-jack, the other a strange, rounded formation unlike anything he'd seen. "What is it?"

"It's biosoft. Jaylene jacked it and said she thought it was output from an AI. It's sort of a dossier on Mitchell, with a message to Hosaka tacked on the end. You better jack it yourself, you wanna get the picture fast . . ."

Turner glanced up from the gray thing. "How'd it grab Jaylene?"

"She said you better be lying down when you do it. She didn't seem to like it much."

Machine dreams hold a special vertigo. Turner lay down on a virgin slab of green temperfoam in the makeshift dorm and jacked Mitchell's dossier. It came on slow; he had time to close his eyes.

Ten seconds later, his eyes were open. He clutched the green foam and fought his nausea. Again, he closed his eyes . . . It came on, again, gradually, a flickering, nonlinear flood of fact and sensory data, a kind of narrative conveyed in surreal jumpcuts and juxtapositions. It was vaguely like riding a rollercoaster that phased in and out of existence at random, impossibly rapid intervals, changing altitude, attack, and

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direction with each pulse of nothingness, except that the shifts had nothing to do with any physical orientation, but rather with lightning alternations in paradigm and symbol-system. The data had never been intended for human input.

Eyes open, he pulled the thing from his socket and held it, his palm slick with sweat. It was like waking from a nightmare. Not a screamer, where impacted fears took on simple, terrible shapes, but the sort of dream, infinitely more disturbing, where everything is perfectly and horribly normal, and where everything is utterly *wrong* . . .

The *intimacy* of the thing was hideous. He fought down waves of raw transference, bringing all his will to bear on crushing a feeling that was akin to love, the obsessive tenderness a watcher comes to feel for the subject of prolonged surveillance. Days or hours later, he knew, the most minute details of Mitchell's academic record might bob to the surface of his mind, or the name of a mistress, the scent of her heavy red hair in the sunlight through—

He sat up quickly, the plastic soles of his shoes smacking the rusted deck. He still wore the parka, and the Smith & Wesson, in a side-pocket, swung painfully against his hip.

It would pass. Mitchell's psychic odor would fade, as surely as the Spanish grammar in the lexicon evaporated after each use. What he had experienced was a Maas security dossier compiles by a sentient computer, nothing more. He replaced the biosoft in Conroy's little black wallet, smoothed the velcro seal with his thumb, and put the cord around his neck.

He became aware of the sound of waves lapping the flanks of the rig.

"Hey, boss," someone said, from beyond the brown military blanket that screened the entrance to the dorm area, "Conroy says it's time for you to inspect the troops, then you and him depart for other parts." Oakey's bearded face slid from behind the blanket. "Otherwise I wouldn't wake you up, right?"

"I wasn't sleeping," Turner said, and stood, fingers reflexively kneading the skin around the implanted socket.

"Too bad," Oakey said, "I got derms'll put you under all the way, one hour on the button, then kick in some kind of righteous upper, get you up and on the case, no lie . . ."

Turner shook his head. "Take me to Conroy."

5
THE JOB

Marly checked into a small hotel with green plants in heavy brass

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pots, the corridors tiled like worn marble chessboards. The elevator was a scrolled gilt cage with rosewood panels smelling of lemon oil and small cigars.

Her room was on the fifth floor. A single tall window overlooked the avenue, the kind of window you could actually open. When the smiling bellman had gone, she collapsed into an armchair whose plush fabric contrasted comfortably with the muted Belgian carpet. She undid the zips on her old Paris boots for the last time, kicked them off, and stared at the dozen glossy carrier bags the bellman had arranged on the bed. Tomorrow, she thought, she'd buy luggage. And a toothbrush.

"I'm in shock," she said to the bags on the bed. "I must take care. Nothing seems real now." She looked down and saw that her hose were both out at the toe. She shook her head. Her new purse lay on the white table beside the bed; it was black, cut from cowhide tanned thick and soft as Flemish butter. It had cost more than she would have owed Andrea for her share of a month's rent, but that was also true of a single night's stay in this hotel. The purse contained her passport and the credit chip she'd been issued in the Gallerie Duperey, drawn on an account held in her name by an orbital branch of the Nederlandse Algemeen Bank.

She went into the bathroom and worked the smooth brass levers of the big white tub. Hot, aerated water hissed out through a Japanese filtration device. The hotel provided packets of bath salts, tubes of creams and scented oils. She emptied a tube of oil into the filling tub and began to remove her clothes, feeling a pang of loss when she tossed the Sally Stanley behind her. Until an hour before, the year-old jacket had been her favorite garment and perhaps the single most expensive thing she'd ever owned. Now it was something for the cleaners to take away; perhaps it would find its way to one of the city's flea markets, the sort of place where she'd hunted bargains as an artschool girl . . .

The mirrors misted and ran, as the room filled with scented steam, blurring the reflection of her nakedness. Was it really this easy? Had Virek's slim gold credit chip checked her out of her misery and into this hotel, where the towels were white and thick and scratchy? She was aware of a certain spiritual vertigo, as though she trembled at the edge of some precipice. She wondered how powerful money could actually be, if one had enough of it, really enough. She supposed that only the Vireks of the world could really know, and very likely they were functionally incapable of *knowing;* asking Virek would be like interrogating a fish in order to learn more about water. Yes, my dear, it's wet; yes, my child, it's certainly warm, scented, scratchy-towelled. She stepped into the tub and lay down.

Tomorrow she would have her hair cut. In Paris.

* * *

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Andrea's phone rang sixteen times before Marly remembered the special program. It would still be in place, and this expensive littel Brussels hotel would not be listed. She leaned out to replace the handset on the marble-topped table and it chimed once, softly.

"A courier has delivered a parcel, from the Gallerie Duperey."

When the bellman—a younger man this time, dark and possibly Spanish—had gone, she took the package to the window and turned it over in her hands. It was wrapped in a single sheet of handmade paper, dark gray, folded and tucked in that mysterious Japanese way that required neither glue nor string, but she knew that once she'd opened it, she'd never get it folded again. The name and address of the Gallerie were embossed in one corner, and her name and the name of her hotel were handwritten across the center in perfect italic script.

She unfolded the paper and found herself holding a new Braun holo projector and a flat envelope of clear plastic. The envelope contained seven numbered tabs of holofiche. Beyond the miniature iron balcony, the sun was going down, painting the Old Town gold. She heard car horns and the cries of children. She closed the window and crossed to a writing desk. The Braun was a smooth black rectangle powered by solar cells. She checked the charge, then took the first holofiche from the envelope and slotted it.

The box she'd seen in Virek's simulation of the Güell Park blossomed above the Braun, glowing with the crystal resolution of the finest museum-grade holograms. Bone and circuit-gold, dead lace and a dull white marble rolled from clay. Marly shook her head. How could anyone have arranged these bits, this garbage, in such a way that it caught at the heart, snagged in the soul like a fish hook? But then she nodded. It could be done, she knew; it had been done many years ago by a man named Cornell, who'd also made boxes.

Then she glanced to the left, where the elegant gray paper lay on the desktop. She'd chosen this hotel at random when she'd grown tired of shopping. She'd told no one she was here, and certainly no one from the Gallerie Duperey.

6
BARRYTOWN

He stayed out for something like eight hours, by the clock on his mother's Hitachi. Came to staring at its dusty face, some hard thing wedged under his thigh. The Ono-Sendai. He rolled over. Stale puke smell.

Then he was in the shower, not sure quite how he'd gotten there,

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spinning the taps with his clothes still on. He clawed and dug and pulled at his face. It felt like a rubber mask.

"Something happened." Something bad, big, he wasn't sure what.

His wet clothes gradually mounded up on the tile floor of the shower. Finally he stepped out, went to the sink and flicked wet hair back from his eyes, peered at the face in the mirror. Bobby Newmark, no problem.

"No, Bobby, problem. Gotta problem . . ."

Towel around his shoulders, dripping water, he followed the narrow hallway to his bedroom, a tiny, wedge-shaped space at the very back of the condo. His holoporn unit lit as he stepped in, half a dozen girls grinning, eyeing him with evident delight. They seemed to be standing beyond the walls of the room, in hazy vistas of powder blue space, their white smiles and taut young bodies bright as neon. Two of them edged forward and began to touch themselves.

"Stop it," he said.

The projection unit shut itself down at his command; the dreamgirls vanished. The thing had originally belonged to Ling Warren's older brother; the girls' hair and clothes were dated and vaguely ridiculous. You could talk with them and get them to do things with themselves and each other. Bobby remembered being thirteen and in love with Brandi, the one with the blue rubber pants. Now he valued the projections mainly for the illusion of space they could provide in the makeshift bedroom.

"Something happened," he said, pulling on black jeans and an almost clean shirt. He shook his head. "What? *What?*" Some kind of power-surge on the line? Some flukey action down at the Fission Authority? Maybe the base he'd tried to invade had suffered some strange breakdown, or been attacked from another quarter. . . . But he was left with the sense of having *met* someone, someone who . . . He'd unconsciously extended his right hand, fingers spread, beseechingly. "Fuck," he said. The fingers balled into a fist. Then it came back: first, the sense of the big thing, the *really* big thing, reaching for him across cyberspace, and then the girl-impression. Someone brown, slender, crouching somewhere in the strange bright dark full of stars and wind. But it slid away as his mind went for it.

Hungry, he got into jeans and sandals and headed back toward the kitchen, rubbing at his hair with a damp towel. On his way through the living room, he noticed the ON telltale of the Ono-Sendai glaring at him from the carpet. "O shit." He stood there and sucked at his teeth. It was still jacked in. Was it possible that it was still linked with the base he'd tried to run? Could they tell he wasn't dead? He had no idea. One thing he did know, though, was that they'd have his number and good. He

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hadn't bothered with the cut-outs and frills that would've kept them from running a backtrack.

They had his address.

Hunger forgotten, he spun into the bathroom and rooted through the soggy clothing until he found his credit chip.

He had two hundred and ten New Yen stashed in the hollow plastic handle of a multi-bit screwdriver. Screwdriver and credit chip secure in his jeans, he pulled on his oldest, heaviest pair of boots, then clawed unwashed clothing from beneath the bed. He came up with a black canvas jacket with at least a dozen pockets.

One of them was a single huge pouch across the small of the back, a kind of integral rucksack. There was a Japanese gravity knife with orange handles beneath his pillow; that went into a narrow pocket on the jacket's left sleeve, near the cuff.

The dreamgirls clicked in as he was leaving: "Bobby, Bobb-y, come back and play . . ."

In the living room, he yanked the Ono-Sendai's jack from the face of the Hitachi, coiling the fiber-optic lead and tucking it into a pocket. He did the same with the trode-set, then slid the Ono-Sendai into the jacket's pack-pocket.

The curtains were still drawn. He felt a surge of some new exhilaration. He was leaving. He *had* to leave. Already he'd forgotten the pathetic fondness that his brush with death had generated. He parted the curtains carefully, a thumb-wide gap, and peered out.

It was late afternoon. In a few hours, the first lights would start blinking on in the dark bulks of the Projects. Big Playground swept away like a concrete sea; the Projects rose beyond the opposite shore, vast rectilinear structures softened by a random overlay of retrofitted greenhouse balconies, catfish tanks, solar heating systems, and the ubiquitous chickenwire dishes.

Two-a-Day would be up there now, sleeping, in a world Bobby had never seen, the world of a mincome arcology. Two-a-Day came down to do business, mostly with the hotdoggers in Barrytown, and then he climbed back up. It had always looked good to Bobby, up there, so much happening on the balconies at night, amid red smudges of charcoal, little kids in their underwear swarming like monkeys, so small you could barely see them. Sometimes the wind would shift, and the smell of cooking would settle over Big Playground, and sometimes you'd see an ultralight glide out from some secret country of rooftop so high up there. And always the mingled beat from a million speakers, waves of music that pulsed and faded in and out of the wind.

Two-a-Day never talked about his life, where he lived. Two-a-Day talked biz, or, to be more social, women. What Two-a-Day said about

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women made Bobby want to get out of Barrytown worse than ever, and Bobby knew that biz would be his only ticket out. But now he needed the dealer in a different way, because now he was entirely out of his depth.

Maybe Two-a-Day could tell him what was happening. There wasn't supposed to be any lethal stuff around that base. Two-a-Day had picked it out for him, then rented him the software he'd need to get in. And Two-a-Day was ready to fence anything he could've gotten out with. So Two-a-Day had to know. Know *something,* anyway.

"I don't even have your number, man," he said to the Projects, letting the curtains fall shut. Should he leave something for his mother? A note? "My ass," he said to the room behind him, *"out* of here," and then he was out the door and down the hall, headed for the stairs. "Forever," he added, kicking open an exit-door.

Big Playground looked safe enough, except for a lone shirtless duster deep in some furious conversation with God. Bobby cut the duster a wide circle; he was shouting and jumping and karate-chopping the air. The duster had dried blood on his bare feet and the remnants of what had probably been a Lobe haircut.

Big Playground was neutral territory, at least in theory, and the Lobes were loosely confederated with the Gothicks; Bobby had fairly solid affiliations with the Gothicks, but retained his indie status. Barrytown was a dicey place to be an indie. At least, he thought, as the duster's angry gibberish faded behind him, the gangs gave you some structure. If you were Gothick and the Kasuals chopped you out, it made sense. Maybe the ultimate reasons behind it were crazy, but there were rules. But indies got chopped out by dusters running on brainstem, by roaming predatory loonies from as far away as New York—like that Penis Collector character last summer, kept the goods in his pocket in a plastic bag . . .

Bobby had been trying to chart a way out of this landscape since the day he was born, or anyway it felt that way. Now, as he walked, the cyberspace deck in the pack-pocket banged against his spine. Like it too was urging him to get out. "Come on, Two-a-Day," he said to the looming Projects, "get your ass down outa there and be in Leon's when I get there, okay?"

Two-a-Day wasn't in Leon's.

Nobody was, unless you wanted to count Leon, who was probing the inner mysteries of a wallscreen converter with a bent paperclip.

"Why don't you just get a hammer and pound it 'til it works?" Bobby asked. "Do you about as much good."

Leon looked up from the converter. He was probably in his forties, but

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it was hard to say. He seemed to be of no particular race, or, in certain lights, to belong to some race that nobody else belonged to. Lots of hypertrophied facial bone and a mane of curly, nonreflective black hair. His basement pirate club had been a fixture in Bobby's life for the past two years.

Leon stared dully at Bobby with his unnerving eyes, pupils of nacreous gray overlaid with a hint of translucent olive. Leon's eyes made Bobby think of oysters and nailpolish, two things he didn't particularly like to think about in connection with eyes. The color was like something they'd use to upholster barstools.

"I just mean you can't fix shit like that by poking at it," Bobby added uncomfortably. Leon shook his head slowly and went back to his exploration. People paid to get into the place because Leon pirated kino and simstim off cable and ran a lot of stuff that Barrytowners couldn't otherwise afford to access. There was dealing in the back and you could make "donations" for drinks, mostly clean Ohio hooch cut with the synthetic orange drink Leon scored in industrial quantities.

"Say, uh, Leon," Bobby began again, "you seen Two-a-Day in here lately?"

The horrible eyes came up again and regarded Bobby for entirely too long. "No."

"Maybe last night?"

"No."

"Night before?"

"No."

"Oh. Okay. Thanks." There was no point in giving Leon a hard time. Lots of reasons not to, actually. Bobby looked around at the wide dim room, at the simstim units and the unlit kino screens. The club was a series of nearly identical rooms in the basement of a semi-residential rack zoned for singles and a sprinkling of light industry. Good soundproofing: you hardly ever heard the music, not from outside. Plenty of nights he'd popped out of Leon's with a head full of noise and pills, into what seemed a magic vacuum of silence, his ears ringing all the way home across Big Playground.

Now he had an hour, probably, before the first Gothicks started to arrive. The dealers, mostly black guys from the Projects or whites from the City or some other burb, wouldn't turn up until there was a patch of Gothicks for them to work on. Nothing made a dealer look worse than just sitting there, waiting, because that would mean you weren't getting any action, and there was no way a genuinely hot dealer would be hanging out in Leon's just for the pleasure of it. It was all hotdog shit, in Leon's, weekenders with cheap decks who watched Japanese icebreaker kinos . . .

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But Two-a-Day wasn't like that, he told himself, on his way up the concrete stairs. Two-a-Day was on his way. Out of the Projects, out of Barrytown, out of Leon's. On his way to the City. To Paris, maybe, or Chiba. The Ono-Sendai bumped against his spine. He remembered that Two-a-Day's icebreaker cassette was still in it. He didn't want to have to explain that to anyone. He passed a news kiosk. A yellow fax of the New York edition of the *Asahi Shimbun* was reeling past a plastic window in the mirrored siding, some government going down in Africa, Russian stuff from Mars . . .

It was that time of day when you could see things very clear, see every little thing so far down the streets, fresh green just starting from the black branches of the trees in their holes in the concrete, and the flash of steel on a girl's boot a block away, like looking through a special kind of water that made seeing easier, even though it was nearly dark. He turned and stared up at the Projects. Whole floors there were forever unlit, either derelict or the windows blacked out. What did they do in there? Maybe he'd ask Two-a-Day sometime.

He checked the time on the kiosk's Coke clock. His mother would be back from Boston by now, had to be, or else she'd miss one of her favorite soaps. New hole in her head. She was crazy anyway, nothing wrong with the socket she'd had since before he was born, but she'd been whining for years about static and resolution and sensory bleedover, so she'd finally swung the credit to go to Boston for some cheapass replacement. Kind of place where you don't even get an appointment for an operation. Walk in and they just slap it in your head . . . He knew her, yeah, how she'd come through the door with a wrapped bottle under her arm, not even take her coat off, just go straight over and jack into the Hitachi, soap her brains out good for six solid hours. Her eyes would unfocus, and sometimes, if it was a really good episode, she'd drool a little. About every twenty minutes she'd manage to remember to take a ladylike nip out of the bottle.

She'd always been that way, as long as he could remember, gradually sliding deeper into her half-dozen synthetic lives, sequential simstim fantasies Bobby had had to hear about all his life. He still harbored creepy feelings that some of the characters she talked about were relatives of his, rich and beautiful aunts and uncles who might turn up one day, if only he weren't such a little shit. Maybe, he thought now, it had been true, in a way; she'd jacked that shit straight through the pregnancy, because she'd told him she had, so he, fetus Newmark, curled up in there, had reverberated to about a thousand hours of *People of Importance* and *Atlanta*. But he didn't like to think about being curled up in Marsha Newmark's belly. It made him feel sweaty and kind of sick.

Marsha-momma. Only in the past year or so had Bobby come to un-

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derstand the world well enough—as he now saw it—to wonder exactly how she still managed to make her way in it, marginal as that way had become, with her bottle and the socket ghosts to keep her company. Sometimes, when she was in a certain mood and had had the right number of nips, she still tried to tell him stories about his father. He'd known since age four that these were bullshit, because the details changed from time to time, but for years he'd allowed himself a certain pleasure in them anyway.

He found a loading-bay a few blocks west of Leon's, screened from the street by a freshly painted blue dumpster, the new paint gleaming over pocked, dented steel. There was a single halogen tube slung over the bay. He found a comfortable ledge of concrete and sat down there, careful not to jar the Ono-Sendai. Sometimes you just had to wait. That was one of the things Two-a-Day had taught him.

The dumpster was overflowing with a varied hash of industrial scrap. Barrytown had its share of gray-legal manufacturers, part of the "shadow economy" the news faces liked to talk about, but Bobby never paid much attention to news faces. Biz. It was all just biz . . .

Moths strobed crooked orbits around the halogen tube. Bobby watched, blankly, as three kids, maybe ten at the oldest, scaled the blue wall of the dumpster with a length of dirty white nylon line and a makeshift grapple that might once have been part of a coatrack. When the last one made it over the top, into the mess of plastic scrap, the line was drawn swiftly up. The scrap began to creak and rustle.

Just like me, Bobby thought, I used to do that, fill my room up with weird garbage I'd find. One time Ling Warren's sister found most of somebody's arm, all wrapped in green plastic and done up with rubber bands.

Marsha-momma'd get these two-hour fits of religion sometimes, come into Bobby's room and sweep all his best garbage out and gum some Godawful self-adhesive hologram up over his bed. Maybe Jesus, maybe Hubbard, maybe Virgin Mary, it didn't much matter to her when the mood was on her. It used to piss Bobby off real good, until one day he was big enough to walk into the front room with a ballpeen hammer and cock it over the Hitachi; you touch my stuff again and I'll kill your friends, Mom, all of 'em. She never tried it again. But the stick-on holograms had actually had some effect on Bobby, because religion was now something he felt he'd considered and put aside. Basically, the way he figured it, there were just some people around who needed it, and he guessed there always had been, but he wasn't one of them, so he didn't.

Now one of the dumpster kids popped up and conducted a slit-eyed survey of the immediate area, then ducked out of sight again. There was a clunking, scraping sound. Small white hands tipped a dented alloy

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cannister up and over the edge, lowering it on the nylon line. Good score, Bobby thought; you could take the thing to a metal dealer and get a little for it. They lowered the thing to the pavement, about a meter from the soles of Bobby's boots; as it touched down, it happened to twist around, showing him the six-horned symbol that stood for biohazard. "Hey," he said, drawing his feet up reflexively.

One of them slid down the rope and steadied the cannister. The other two followed. He saw that they were younger than he'd thought.

"Hey," Bobby said, "you know that could be some real bad shit? Give you cancer and stuff."

"Go lick a dog's ass 'til it bleeds," the first kid down the rope advised him, as they flicked their grapple loose, coiled their line, and dragged the cannister around the corner of the dumpster and out of sight.

He gave it an hour and a half. Time enough: Leon's was starting to cook.

At least twenty Gothicks postured in the main room, like a herd of baby dinosaurs, their crests of lacquered hair bobbing and twitching. The majority approached the Gothick ideal: tall, lean, muscular, but touched by a certain gaunt restlessness, young athletes in the early stages of consumption. The graveyard pallor was mandatory, and Gothick hair was by definition black. Bobby knew that the few who couldn't warp their bodies to fit the subcultural template were best avoided; a short Gothick was trouble, a fat Gothick homicidal.

Now he watched them flexing and glittering in Leon's like a composite creature, slime-mold with a jigsaw surface of dark leather and stainless spikes. Most of them had nearly identical faces, features reworked to match ancient archetypes culled from kino banks. He chose a particularly artful Dean whose hair swayed like the mating display of a nocturnal lizard. "Bro," Bobby began, uncertain if he'd met this one before.

"My man," the Dean responded languidly, his left cheek distended by a cud of resin. "The Count, baby," as an aside to his girl, "Count Zero Interrupt." Long pale hand with the fresh scab across the back grabbing ass through the girl's leather skirt: "Count, this is my squeeze." The Gothick girl regarded Bobby with mild interest but no flash of human recognition whatever, as though she were seeing an ad for a product she'd heard of but had no intention of buying.

Bobby scanned the crowd. A few black faces, but none he knew. No Two-a-Day. "Say hey," he confided, "now you know how it is 'n' all, I'm lookin' for this close personal friend, business friend," and at this the Gothick sagely bobbed his crest, "goes by Two-a-Day . . ." He paused. The Gothick looked blank, snapping his resin. The girl looked bored,

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restless. " 'Wareman," Bobby added, raising his eyebrows, "black 'wareman."

"Two-a-Day," the Gothick said. "Sure. Two-a-Day. Right, babe?" His girl tossed her head and looked away.

"You know 'im?"

"Sure."

"He here tonight?"

"No," the Gothick said, and smiled meaninglessly.

Bobby opened his mouth, closed it, forced himself to nod. "Thanks, bro."

"Anything for my man," the Gothick said.

Another hour, more of the same. Too much white, chalk-pale Gothick white. Flat bright eyes of their girls, their bootheels like ebony needles. He tried to stay out of the simstim room, where Leon was running some kind of weird jungle fuck tape phased you in and out of these different kinda animals, lotta crazed arboreal action up in the trees, which Bobby found a little disorienting. He was hungry enough, now, to feel a little spaced, or maybe it was afterburn from whatever it was had happened to him before, but he was starting to have a hard time concentrating, and his thoughts drifted in odd directions. Like who, for instance, had climbed up into those trees full of snakes and wired a pair those rat-things for simstim?

The Gothicks were into it, however. They were thrashing and stomping and generally into major tree-rat identification. Leon's new hit tape, Bobby decided.

Just to his left, but well out of range of the stim, two Project girls stood, their baroque finery in sharp contrast with Gothick monochrome. Long black frock coats opened over tight red vests in silk brocade, the tails of enormous white shirts hanging well beneath their knees. Their dark features were concealed beneath the brims of fedoras pinned and hung with fragments of antique gold: stickpins, charms, teeth, mechanical watches. Bobby watched them covertly; the clothes said they had money, but that someone would make it worth your ass if you tried to go for it. One time Two-a-Day had come down from the Projects in this ice-blue shaved-velour number with diamond buckles at the knees, like maybe he hadn't had time to change, but Bobby had acted like the 'wareman was dressed in his usual leathers, because he figured a cosmopolitan attitude was crucial in biz.

He tried to imagine going up to them so smooth, just putting it to them: hey, you ladies surely must know my good friend Mr. Two-a-Day? But they were older than he was, taller, and moved with a dignity he found

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intimidating. Probably they'd just laugh, but somehow he didn't want that at all.

What he did want now, and very badly, was food. He touched his credit chip through the denim of his jeans. He'd go across the street and get a sandwich . . . Then he remembered why he was here, and suddenly it didn't seem very smart to use his chip. If he'd been sussed, after his attempted run, they'd have his chip-number by now; using it would spotlight him for anyone tracking him in cyberspace, pick him out in the Barrytown grid like a highway flare in a dark football stadium. He had his cash money, but you couldn't pay for food with that. It wasn't actually illegal to have the stuff, it was just that nobody ever did anything legitimate with it. He'd have to find a Gothick with a chip, buy a New Yen's worth of credit, probably at a vicious discount, then have the Gothick pay for the food. And what the hell was he supposed to take his change in?

Maybe you're just spooked, he told himself. He didn't know for sure that he was being backtracked, and the base he'd tried to crack was legit, or was anyway supposed to be legit. That was why Two-a-Day had told him he didn't have to worry about black ice. Who'd put lethal feedback programs around a place that leased soft kino porn? The idea had been that he'd bleep out a few hours of digitalized kino, new stuff that hadn't made it to the bootleg market. It wasn't the kind of score anybody was liable to kill you for. . . .

But somebody had tried. And something else had happened. Something entirely else. He trudged back up the stairs again, out of Leon's. He knew there was a lot he didn't know about the matrix, but he'd never heard of anything that weird. . . . You got ghost stories, sure, and hotdoggers who swore they'd seen things in cyberspace, but he had them figured for wilsons who jacked in dusted; you could hallucinate in the matrix as easily as anywhere else . . .

Maybe that's what happened, he thought. The voice was just part of dying, being flatlined, some crazy bullshit your brain threw up to make you feel better, and something had happened back at the source, maybe a brownout in their part of the grid, so the ice had lost its hold on his nervous system.

Maybe. But he didn't know. Didn't know the turf. His ignorance had started to dig into him, recently, because it kept him from making the moves he needed to make. He hadn't ever much thought about it before, but he didn't really know that much about anything in particular. In fact, up until he'd started hotdogging, he'd felt like he knew about as much as he needed to. And that was what the Gothicks were like, and that was why the Gothicks would stay here and burn themselves down on dust, or get chopped out by Kasuals, and the process of attrition would

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produce the percentage of them who'd somehow become the next wave of child-bearing, condo-buying Barrytowners, and the whole thing could go round again. . . .

He was like a kid who'd grown up beside an ocean, taking it as much for granted as he took the sky, but knowing nothing of currents, shipping routes, or the ins and outs of weather. He'd used decks in school, toys that shuttled you through the infinite reaches of that space that wasn't space, mankind's unthinkably complex consensual hallucination, the matrix, cyberspace, where the great corporate hotcores burned like neon novas, data so dense you suffered sensory overload if you tried to apprehend more than the merest outline.

But since he'd started hotdogging, he had some idea of how precious little he knew about how anything worked, and not just in the matrix. It spilled over, somehow, and he'd started to wonder, wonder and think. How Barrytown worked, what kept his mother going, why Gothicks and Kasuals invested all that energy in trying to kill each other off. Or why Two-a-Day was black and lived up the Projects, and what made that different.

As he walked, he kept up his search for the dealer. White faces, more white faces.

His stomach had started to make a certain amount of noise; he thought about the fresh package of wheat cutlets in the fridge at home, fry 'em up with some soy and crack a pack of krill wafers . . .

Passing the kiosk again, he checked the Coke clock. Marsha was home for sure, deep in the labyrinthine complexities of *People of Importance,* whose female protagonist's life she'd shared through a socket for almost twenty years. The *Asahi Shimbun* fax was still rolling down behind its little window, and he stepped closer in time to see the first report of the bombing of A Block, Level 3, Covina Concourse Courts, Barrytown, New Jersey . . .

Then it was gone, past, and there was a story about the formal funeral of the Cleveland Yakusa boss. Strictly trad. They all carried black umbrellas.

He'd lived all his life in 503, A Block.

That enormous thing, leaning in, to stomp Marsha Newmark and her Hitachi flat.

And of course it had been meant for him.

"There's somebody doesn't mess around," he heard himself say.

"Hey! My man! Count! You dusted, bro? Hey! Where you headin'!"

The eyes of two Deans twisting to follow him in the course of his headlong panic.

* * *

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7
THE MALL

Conroy swung the blue Fokker off the eroded ribbon of pre-war highway and throttled down. The long roostertail of pale dust that had followed them from Needles began to settle; the hovercraft sank into its inflated apron-bag as they came to a halt.

"Here's the venue, Turner."

"What hit it?" Rectangular expanse of concrete spreading to uneven walls of weathered cinderblock.

"Economics," Conroy said. "Before the war. They never finished it. Ten klicks west of here and there's whole subdivisions, just pavement-grids, no houses, nothing."

"How big a site team?"

"Nine, not counting you. And the medics."

"What medics?"

"Hosaka's. Maas is biologicals, right? No telling how they might have our boy kinked. So Hosaka's built a regular little neurosurgery and staffed it with three hotshots. Two of them are company men, the third's a Korean who knows black medicine from both ends. The medical pod's in that long one there," he pointed, "gotta partial section of roof."

"How'd you get it on site?"

"Brought it from Tucson inside a tanker. Faked a breakdown. Got it out, rolled it in. Took all hands. Maybe three minutes."

"Maas," Turner said.

"Sure." Conroy killed the engines. "Chance you take," he said, in the abrupt silence. "Maybe they missed it. Our guy in the tanker sat there and bitched to his dispatcher in Tucson on the CB, all about his shiteating heat-exchanger and how long it was going to take to fix it. Figure they picked that up. You think of a better way to do it?"

"No. Given that the client wants the thing on the site. But we're sitting here now in the middle of their recon footprint . . ."

"Sweetheart," and Conroy snorted, "maybe we just stopped for a screw. Break up our trip to Tucson, right? It's that kind of place. People stop here to piss, you know?" He checked his black Porsche watch. "I'm due there in an hour, get a copter back to the coast."

"The rig?"

"No. Your jet. Figured I handled that myself."

"Good."

"I'd go for a Dornier System ground-effect plane, myself. Have it wait down the road until we see Mitchell heading in. It could get here by the time the medics clean him up; we toss him in and take off for the Sonora border . . ."

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"At subsonic speeds," Turner said. "No way. You're on your way to California to buy me that jump jet. Our boy's going out of here in a multi-mission combat aircraft that's barely even obsolete."

"You got a pilot in mind?"

"Me," Turner said, and tapped the socket behind his ear. "It's a fully-integrated interactive system. They'll sell you the interface software and I'll jack straight in."

"Didn't know you could fly."

"I can't. You don't need hands-on to haul ass for Mexico City."

"Still the wild boy, Turner? You know the rumor's that somebody blew your dick off, back there in Delhi?" Conroy swung around to face him, his grin cold and clean.

Turner dug the parka from behind the seat and took out the pistol and the box of ammunition. He was stuffing the parka back again when Conroy said, "Keep it. It gets cold as hell here, at night."

Turner reached for the canopy-latch and Conroy revved the engines. The hovercraft rose a few centimeters, swaying slightly as Turner popped the canopy and climbed out. White-out sun and air like hot velvet. He took his Mexican sunglasses from the pocket of the blue workshirt and put them on. He wore white deckshoes and a pair of tropical combat fatigues. The box of explosive shells went into one of the thigh-pockets on the fatigues. He kept the gun in his right hand, the parka bundled under his left arm. "Head for the long building," Conroy said, over the engine, "they're expecting you."

He jumped down into the furnace glow of desert noon as Conroy revved the Fokker again and edged it back to the highway. He watched as it sped east, its receding image distorted through wrinkles of rising heat.

When it was gone, there was no sound at all, no movement. He turned, facing the ruin. Something small and stone-gray darted between two rocks. Perhaps eighty meters from the highway the jagged walls began. The expanse between had once been a parking lot.

Five steps forward and he stopped. He heard the sea, surf pounding, soft explosions as breakers fell. The gun was in his hand, too large, too real, its metal warming in the sun.

No sea, no sea, he told himself, can't hear it. He walked on, the deckshoes slipping in drifts of ancient windowglass seasoned with brown and green shards of bottle. There were rusted discs that had been bottlecaps, flattened rectangles that had been aluminum cans. Insects whirred up from low clumps of dry brush.

Over. Done with. This place. No time . . .

He stopped again, straining forward, as though he sought something that would help him name the thing that was rising in him. Something hollow . . .

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The mall was doubly dead. The beach hotel in Mexico had lived once, at least for a season . . .

Beyond the parking lot, the sunlit cinderblock, cheap and soulless, waiting.

He found them crouched in the narrow strip of shade provided by a length of gray wall. Three of them; he smelled the coffee before he saw them, the fire-blackened enamel pot balanced precariously on the tiny Primus cooker. He was meant to smell it, of course; they were expecting him. Otherwise, he'd have found the ruin empty, and then, somehow, very quietly and almost naturally, he would have died.

Two men, a woman; cracked, dusty boots out of Texas, denim so shiny with grease that it would probably be waterproof. The men were bearded, their uncut hair bound up in sun-bleached topknots with lengths of rawhide, the woman's hair center-parted and pulled back tight from a seamed, windburnt face. An ancient BMW motorcycle was propped against the wall, flecked chrome and battered paintwork daubed with airbrush blobs of tan and gray desert camo.

He released the Smith & Wesson's grip, letting it pivot around his index finger, so that the barrel pointed up and back.

"Turner," one of the men said, rising, cheap metal flashing from his teeth. "Sutcliffe." Trace of an accent, probably Australian.

"Point team?" He looked at the other two.

"Point," Sutcliffe said, and probed his mouth with a tanned thumb and forefinger, coming away with a yellowed, steel-capped prostho. His own teeth were white and perfectly even. "You took Chauvet from IBM for Mitsu," he said, "and they say you took Semenov out of Tomsk."

"Is that a question?"

"I was security for IBM Marrakech when you blew the hotel."

Turner met the man's eyes. They were blue, calm, very bright. "Is that a problem for you?"

"No fear," Sutcliffe said. "Just to say I've seen you work." He snapped the prostho back in place. "Lynch," nodding toward the other man, "and Webber," toward the woman.

"Run it down to me," Turner said, and lowered himself into the scrap of shade. He squatted on his haunches, still holding the gun.

"We came in three days ago," Webber said, "on two bikes. We arranged for one of them to snap its crankshaft, in case we had to make an excuse for camping here. There's a sparse transient population, gypsy bikers and cultists. Lynch walked an optics spool six kilos east and tapped into a phone . . ."

"Private?"

"Pay," Lynch said.

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"We sent out a test squirt," the woman continued. "If it hadn't worked, you'd know it."

Turner nodded. "Incoming traffic?"

"Nothing. It's strictly for the big show, whatever that is . . ." She raised her eyebrows.

"It's a defection."

"Bit obvious, that," Sutcliffe said, settling himself beside Webber, his back to the wall. "Though the general tone of the operation so far suggests that we hirelings aren't likely to even know who we're extracting. True, Mr. Turner? Or will we be able to read about it in the fax?"

Turner ignored him. "Go on, Webber."

"After our landline was in place, the rest of the crew filtered in, one or two at a time. The last one in primed us for the tank full of Japs."

"That was raw," Sutcliffe said, "bit too far up front."

"You think it might have blown us?" Turner asked.

Sutcliffe shrugged. "Could be, could be no. We hopped it pretty quick. Damned lucky we'd the roof to tuck it under."

"What about the passengers?"

"They only come out at night," Webber said. "And they know we'll kill them if they try to get more than five meters away from the thing."

Turner glanced at Sutcliffe. "Conroy's orders," the man said.

"Conroy's orders don't count now," Turner said. "But that one holds. What are these people like?"

"Medicals," Lynch said, "bent medicals."

"You got it," Turner said. "What about the rest of the crew?"

"We rigged some shade with mimetic tarps. They sleep in shifts. There's not enough water and we can't risk much in the way of cooking." Sutcliffe reached for the coffee pot. "We have sentries in place and we run periodic checks on the integrity of the landline." He splashed black coffee into a plastic mug that looked as though it had been chewed by a dog. "So when do we do our dance, Mr. Turner?"

"I want to see your tank of pet medics. I want to see a command post. You haven't said anything about a command post."

"All set," Lynch said.

"Fine. Here." Turner passed Webber the revolver. "See if you can find me some sort of rig for this. Now I want Lynch to show me these medics."

"He thought it would be you," Lynch said, scrambling effortlessly up a low incline of rubble. Turner followed. "You've got quite a rep." The younger man glanced back at him from beneath a fringe of dirty, sun-streaked hair.

"Too much of one," Turner said. "Any is too much. You worked with him before? Marrakech?" Lynch ducked sideways through a gap in the

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cinderblock and Turner was close behind. The desert plants smelled of tar; they stung and grabbed, if you brushed them. Through a vacant, rectangular opening intended for a window, Turner glimpsed pink mountaintops, then Lynch was loping down a slope of gravel.

"Sure, I worked for him before," Lynch said, pausing at the base of the slide. An ancient-looking leather belt rode low on his hips, its heavy buckle a tarnished silver deathshead with a dorsal crest of blunt, pyramidal spikes. "Marrakech, that was before my time."

"Connie too, Lynch?"

"How's that?"

"Conroy. You work for him before? More to the point, are you working for him now?" Turner came slowly, deliberately down the gravel as he spoke; it crunched and slid beneath his deckshoes, uneasy footing. He could see the delicate little fletcher holstered beneath Lynch's denim vest.

Lynch licked dry lips, held his ground. "That's Sut's contact. I haven't met him."

"Conroy has this problem, Lynch. Can't delegate responsibility. He likes to have his own man from the start, someone to watch the watchers. Always. You the one, Lynch?"

Lynch shook his head, the absolute minimum of movement required to convey the negative. Turner was close enough to smell his sweat above the tarry odor of the desert plants.

"I've seen Conroy blow two extractions that way," Turner said. "Lizards and broken glass, Lynch? You feel like dying here?" Turner raised his fist in front of Lynch's face and slowly extended the index finger, pointing straight up. "We're in their footprint. If a plant of Conroy's bleeps the least fucking pulse out of here, they'll be on to us."

"If they aren't already."

"That's right."

"Sut's your man," Lynch said. "Not me, and I can't see it being Webber." Black-rimmed, broken nails came up to scratch abstractedly at his beard. "Now, did you get me back here exclusively for this little talk, or do you still wanna see our can full of Japs?"

"Let's see it."

Lynch. Lynch was the one.

Once, in Mexico, years before, Turner had chartered a portable vacation module, solar-powered and French-built, its seven-meter body like a wingless housefly sculpted in polished alloy, its eyes twin hemispheres of tinted, photosensitive plastic; he sat behind them as an aged twin-prop Russian cargo-lifter lumbered down the coast with the module in its jaws, barely clearing the crowns of the tallest palms. Deposited on a

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remote beach of black sand, Turner spent three days of pampered solitude in the narrow, teak-lined cabin, microwaving food from the freezer and showering, frugally but regularly, in cool fresh water. The module's rectangular banks of cells would swivel, tracking the sun, and he'd learned to tell time by their position.

Hosaka's portable neurosurgery resembled an eyeless version of that French module, perhaps two meters longer and painted a dull brown. Sections of perforated angle-iron had been freshly braised at intervals along the lower half of the hull, and supported simple spring-suspensions for ten fat, heavily knubbed red rubber bicycle tires.

"They're asleep," Lynch said. "It bobs around when they move, so you can tell. We'll have the wheels off when the time comes, but for now we like being able to keep track of them."

Turner walked slowly around the brown pod, noting the glossy black sewage tube that ran to a small, rectangular tank nearby.

"Had to dump that, last night. Jesus." Lynch shook his head. "They got food and some water."

Turner put his ear to the hull.

"It's proofed," Lynch said.

Turner glanced up at the steel roof above them. The surgery was screened from above by a good ten meters of rusting roof. Sheet steel, and hot enough now to fry an egg.

He nodded. That hot rectangle would be a permanent factor in the Maas infrared scan.

"Bats," Webber said, handing him the Smith & Wesson in a black nylon shoulder rig. The dusk was full of sounds that seemed to come from inner space, metallic squeaks and the cackling of bugs, cries of unseen birds. Turner shoved gun and holster into a pocket on the parka. "You wanna piss, go up by that mesquite. But watch out for the thorns."

"Where are you from?"

"New Mexico," the woman said, her face like carved wood in the remaining light. She turned and walked away, heading for the angle of walls that sheltered the tarps. He could make out Sutcliffe and a young black man there. They were eating from dull foil envelopes. Ramirez, the on-site console jockey, Jaylene Slide's partner. Out of Los Angeles.

Turner looked up at the bowl of sky, limitless, the map of stars. Strange how it's bigger this way, he thought. From orbit it's just a gulf, formless, and scale loses all meaning. And tonight he wouldn't sleep, he knew, and the Big Dipper would whirl round for him and dive for the horizon, pulling its tail with it.

A wave of nausea and dislocation hit him as images from the biosoft dossier swam unbidden through his mind.

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8
PARIS

Andrea lived in the Quartier des Ternes, where her ancient building, like the others in her street, awaited sandblasting by the city's relentless renovators. Beyond the dark entrance, one of Fuji Electric's biofluorescent strips glowed dimly above a dilapidated wall of small wooden hutches, some with their slotted doors still intact. Marly knew that postmen had once made daily deposits of mail through those slots; there was something romantic about the idea, although the hutches, with their yellowing business cards announcing the occupations of long-vanished tenants, had always depressed her. The walls of the hallway were stapled with bulging loops of cable and fiber-optics, each strand a potential nightmare for some hapless utilities repairman. At the far end, through an open door paneled with dusty pebble-glass, was a disused courtyard, its cobbles shiny with damp.

The concierge was sitting in the courtyard, as Marly entered the building, on a white plastic crate that had once held bottles of Evian water. He was patiently oiling each link of an old bicycle's black chain. He glanced up as she began to climb the first flight of stairs, but registered no particular interest.

The stairs were made of marble, worn dull and concave by generations of tenants. Andrea's apartment was on the fourth floor. Two rooms, kitchen, and bath. Marly had come here when she'd closed her gallery for the last time, when it was no longer possible to sleep in the makeshift bedroom she'd shared with Alain, the little room behind the storeroom. Now the building brought her depression circling in again, but the feel of her new outfit and the tidy click of her bootheels on marble kept it at a distance. She wore an oversized leather coat a few shades lighter than her handbag, a wool skirt, and a silk blouse from Paris Isetan. She'd had her hair cut that morning on Faubourg St. Honore, by a Burmese girl with a West German laser-pencil; an expensive cut, subtle without being too conservative.

She touched the round plate bolted in the center of Andrea's door, heard it peep once, softly, as it read the whorls and ridges of her fingertips.

"It's me, Andrea," she said to the tiny microphone. A series of clanks and tickings as her friend unbolted the door.

Andrea stood there, dripping wet, in an old terry robe. She took in Marly's new look, then smiled. "Did you get your job, or have you robbed a bank?" Marly stepped in, kissing her friend's wet cheek.

"It feels a bit of both," she said, and laughed.

"Coffee," said Andrea, "make us coffee. Grands cremes. I must rinse

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my hair. And yours is beautiful . . ." She went into the bathroom and Marly heard a spray of water across porcelain.

"I've brought you a present," Marly said, but Andrea couldn't hear her. She went into the kitchen and filled the kettle, lit the stove with the old-fashioned spark-gun and began to search the crowded shelves for coffee.

"Yes," Andrea was saying, "I do see it." She was peering into the hologram of the box Marly had first seen in Virek's construct of Gaudi's park. "It's your sort of thing." She touched a stud and the Braun's illusion winked out. Beyond the room's single window, the sky was stippled with a few wisps of cirrus. "Too grim for me, too serious. Like the things you showed at your gallery. But that can only mean that Herr Virek has chosen well; you will solve his mystery for him. If I were you, considering the wage, I might take my own good time about it." Andrea wore Marly's gift, an expensive, beautifully detailed man's dress shirt, in gray Flemish flannel. It was the sort of thing she liked most, and her delight in it was obvious. It set off her pale hair, and was very nearly the color of her eyes.

"He's quite horrible, Virek, I think . . ." Marly hesitated.

"Quite likely," Andrea said, taking another sip of coffee. "Do you expect anyone that wealthy to be a nice, normal sort?"

"I felt, at one point, that he wasn't quite human. Felt that very strongly."

"But he isn't, Marly. You were talking with a projection, a special effect . . ."

"Still . . ." She made a gesture of helplessness which immediately made her feel annoyed with herself.

"Still, he is very, very wealthy, and he's paying you a great deal to do something that you may be uniquely suited to do." Andrea smiled and readjusted a finely-turned charcoal cuff. "You don't have a great deal of choice, do you?"

"I know. I suppose that's what's making me uneasy."

"Well," Andrea said, "I thought I might put off telling you a bit longer, but I have something else which may make you feel uneasy. If 'uneasy' is the word."

"Yes?"

"I considered not telling you at all, but I'm sure he'll get to you eventually. He smells money, I suppose."

Marly put her empty cup down carefully on the cluttered little rattan table.

"He's quite acute, that way," Andrea said.

"When?"

"Yesterday. It began, I think, about an hour after you would have had

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your interview with Virek. He called me at work. He left a message here, with the concierge. If I were to remove the screen-program," and she gestured toward the phone, "I think he'd ring within thirty minutes."

Remembering the concierge's eyes, the ticking of the bicycle chain.

"He wants to talk, he said," Andrea said. "Only to talk. Do you want to talk with him, Marly?"

"No," she said, and her voice was a little girl's voice, high and ridiculous. Then: "Did he leave a number?"

Andrea sighed, slowly shook her head, and then said, "Yes, of course he did."

9
UP THE PROJECTS

The dark was full of honeycomb patterns the color of blood. Everything was warm. And soft, too, mostly soft.

"What a mess," one of the angels said, her voice far off but low and rich and very clear.

"We should've clipped him out of Leon's," the other angel said. "They aren't gonna like this upstairs."

"Must've had something in this big pocket here, see? They slashed it for him, getting it out."

"Not all they slashed, sister. Jesus. Here."

The patterns swung and swam as something moved his head. Cool palm against his cheek.

"Don't get any on your shirt," the first angel said.

"Two-a-Day ain't gonna like this. Why you figure he freaked like that and ran?"

It pissed him off, because he wanted to sleep. He *was* asleep, for sure, but somehow Marsha's jack-dreams were bleeding into his head, so that he tumbled through broken sequences of *People of Importance*. The soap had been running continuously since before he was born, the plot a multi-headed narrative tapeworm that coiled back in to devour itself every few months, then sprouted new heads hungry for tension and thrust. He could see it writhing in its totality, the way Marsha could never see it, an elongated spiral of Sense/Net DNA, cheap brittle ectoplasm spun out to uncounted hungry dreamers. Marsha, now, she had it from the POV of Michele Morgan Magnum, the female lead, hereditary corporate head of Magnum AG. But today's episode kept veering weirdly away from Michele's frantically complex romantic entanglements, which Bobby had anyway never bothered to keep track of, and jerking itself into detailed

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socio-architectural descriptions of Soleri-style mincome arcologies. Some of the detail, even to Bobby, seemed suspect; he doubted, for instance, that there really were entire levels devoted to the sale of ice-blue shaved-velour lounge suits with diamond-buckled knees, or that there were other levels, perpetually dark, inhabited exclusively by starving babies. This last, he seemed to recall, had been an article of faith to Marsha, who regarded the Projects with superstitious horror, as though they were some looming vertical hell to which she might one day be forced to ascend. Other segments of the jack-dream reminded him of the Knowledge channel Sense/Net piped in free with every stim subscription; there were elongated animated diagrams of the Projects' interior structure, and droning lectures in voice-over on the lifestyles of various types of resident. These, when he was able to focus on them, seemed even less convincing than the flashes of ice-blue velour and feral babies creeping silently through the dark. He watched a cheerful young mother slice pizza with a huge industrial waterknife in the kitchen corner of a spotless one-room. An entire wall opened to a shallow balcony and a rectangle of cartoon-blue sky. The woman was black without being black, it seemed to Bobby, like a very, very dark and youthfully maternal version of one of the porno dolls on the unit in his bedroom. And had, it looked like, the identical small but cartoon-perfect breasts. (At this point, to add to his dull confusion, an astonishingly loud and very un-Net voice said, "Now I call *that* a definite sign of life, Jackie. If the prognosis ain't lookin' up yet, at least somethin' is . . .") And then went spinning back into the all-glitz universe of Michele Morgan Magnum, who was desperately struggling to prevent Magnum AG's takeover by the sinister Shikoku-based Nakamura industrial clan, represented in this case by (plot complication) Michele's main squeeze for the season, wealthy (but somehow grindingly in need of additional billions) New Soviet boy politician Vasily Suslov, who looked and dressed remarkably like the Gothicks in Leon's.

The episode seemed to be reaching some sort of climax—an antique BMW fuel-cell conversion had just been straffed by servo-piloted miniature West German helicopters on the street below Covina Concourse Courts, Michele Morgan Magnum was pistol-whipping her treacherous personal secretary with a nickel-placed Nambu, and Suslov, who Bobby was coming increasingly to identify with, was casually preparing to get his ass out of town with a gorgeous female bodyguard who was Japanese but reminded Bobby intensely of another one of the dreamgirls on his holoporn unit—when someone screamed.

Bobby had never heard anyone scream that way, and there was something horribly familiar about the voice. But before he could start to worry about it, those blood-red honeycombs came swirling in again and made

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him miss the end of *People of Importance*. Still, some part of him thought, as red went to black, he could always ask Marsha how it came out.

"Open your eyes, man. That's it. Light too bright for you?"

It was, but it didn't change. White, white, he remembered his head exploding years away, pure white grenade in that coolwind desert dark. His eyes were open, but he couldn't see. Just white.

"Now I'd leave you down, ordinarily, boy in your condition, but the people paying me for this say get a jump on, so I'm wakin' you up before I'm done. You wonderin' why you can't see shit, right? Just light, that's all you can see, that's right. What we got here is a neural cut-out. Now, between you and me, this thing came out of a sex shop, but there's no reason not to use it in medicine if we want to. And we do want to, because you're still hurtin' bad, and anyway it keeps you still while I get on with it." The voice was calm and methodical. "Now, your big problem, that was your back, but I took care of that with a stapler and a few feet of claw. You don't get any plastic work here, you understand, but the honeys'll think those scars are real interesting. What I'm doin' now, is I'm cleanin' this one on your chest, then I'll zip a little claw down *that* and we're all done, except you better move easy for a couple of days or you'll pull a staple. I got a couple of derms on you, and I'll stick on a few more. Meantime, I'm gonna click your sensorium up to audio and full visual so you can get into being here. Don't mind the blood; it's all yours but there isn't any more comin'."

White curdled to gray cloud, objects taking form with the slow deliberation of a dust-vision. He was flat against a padded ceiling, staring straight down at a blood-stained white doll that had no head at all, only a greenish-blue surgical lamp that seemed to sprout from its shoulders. A black man in a stained green smock was spraying something yellow into a shallow gash that ran diagonally from just above the doll's pelvic bone to just below its left nipple. He knew the man was black because his head was bare, bare and shaven, slick with sweat; his hands were covered in tight green gloves and all that Bobby could see of him was the gleaming crown of his head. There were pink and blue dermadisks stuck to the skin on either side of the doll's neck. The edges of the wound seemed to have been painted with something that looked like chocolate syrup, and the yellow spray made a hissing sound as it escaped from its little silver tube.

Then Bobby got the picture and the universe reversed itself sickeningly. The lamp was suspended from the ceiling, the ceiling was mirrored, and he was the doll. He seemed to snap back on a long elastic cord, back through the red honeycombs, to the dream-room where the black girl sliced pizza for her children. The waterknife made no sound at all, mi-

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croscopic grit suspended in a needle-stream of high-speed water. The thing was intended to cut glass and alloy, Bobby knew, not to slice microwaved pizza, and he wanted to scream at her because he was terrified she'd take off her thumb without even feeling it.

But he couldn't scream, couldn't move or make a sound at all. She lovingly sliced the last piece, toed the kickplate that shut the knife down, transferred the sliced pizza to a plain white ceramic platter, then turned toward the rectangle of blue beyond the balcony, where her children were—no, Bobby said, way down in himself, *no* way. Because the things that wheeled and plunged for her weren't hang-gliding kids, but babies, the monstrous babies of Marsha's dream, and the tattered wings a confusion of pink bone, metal, patched taut membranes of scrap plastic . . . He saw their teeth . . .

"Whoa," said the black man, "lost you for a second. Not for long, you understand, just maybe a New York minute . . ." His hand, in the mirrors overhead, took a flat spool of blue transparent plastic from the bloody cloth beside Bobby's ribs. Delicately, with thumb and forefinger, he drew out a length of some sort of brown, beaded plastic. Minute points of light flashed along its edges, and seemed to quiver and shift. "Claw," he said, and with his other hand thumbed some sort of integral cutter in the sealed blue spool. Now the length of beaded stuff swung free, and began to writhe. "Good shit," he said, bringing the thing into Bobby's line of sight. "New. What they use in Chiba now." It was brown, headless, each bead a body-segment, each segment edged with pale shining legs. Then, with a conjurer's flick of his green-gloved wrists, he lay the centipede down the length of the open wound and pinched delicately at the final segment, the one nearest Bobby's face. As the segment came away, it withdrew a glittering black thread that had served the thing as a nervous system, and as that went, each set of claws locked shut in turn, zipping the slash tight as a new leather jacket.

"Now, you see," said the black man, mopping the last of the brown syrup away with a wet white pad, "That wasn't so bad, was it?"

His entrance to Two-a-Day's apartment wasn't anything like the way he'd so often imagined it. To begin with, he'd never imagined being wheeled in in a wheelchair that someone had appropriated from St. Mary's Maternity—the name and a serial number neatly laser-etched on the dull chrome of the left armrest. The woman who was wheeling him would have fitted neatly enough into one of his fantasies; her name was Jackie, one of the two Project girls he'd seen at Leon's, and, he'd come to understand, one of his two angels. The wheelchair was silent as it glided across the scabrous gray wall-to-wall of the apartment's narrow

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entrance-way, but the gold bangles on Jackie's fedora tinkled cheerfully as she pushed him along.

And he'd never imagined that Two-a-Day's place would be quite this large, or that it would be full of trees.

Pye, the doctor, who'd been careful to explain that he *wasn't* a doctor, just someone who "helped out sometimes," had settled back on a torn barstool in his makeshift surgery, peeled off his bloody green gloves, lit a menthol cigarette, and solemnly advised Bobby to take it real easy for the next week or so. Minutes later, Jackie and Rhea, the other angel, had wrestled him into a pair of wrinkled black pajamas that looked like something out of a very cheap ninja kino, deposited him in the wheelchair, and set out for the central stem of elevators at the arcology's core. Thanks to an additional three derms from Pye's store of drugs, one of them charged with a good two thousand mikes of endorphin analog, Bobby was alert and feeling no pain.

"Where's my stuff," he protested, as they rolled him out into a corridor grown perilously narrow with decades of retrofitted ducts and plumbing, "where's my clothes and my deck and everything?"

"Your clothes, hon, such as they were, are taped up in a plastic bag waiting for Pye to shitcan 'em. Pye had to cut 'em off you on the slab, and they weren't but bloody rags to begin with. If your deck was in your jacket, down the back, I'd say the boys who chopped you out got it. Damn near got you in the process. And you *ruined* my Sally Stanley shirt, you little shithead." Angel Rhea didn't seem too friendly.

"Oh," Bobby said, as they rounded a corner, "right. Well, did you happen to find a screwdriver in there? Or a credit chip?"

"No chip, baby. But if the screwdriver's the one with the two hundred and ten New ones screwed into the handle, that's the price of my new shirt . . ."

Two-a-Day didn't look as though he was particularly glad to see Bobby. In fact, it almost seemed as if he didn't see him at all. Looked straight through him to Jackie and Rhea and showed his teeth in a smile that was all nerves and sleep-lack. They wheeled Bobby close enough that he saw how yellow Two-a-Day's eyeballs looked, almost orange in the pinky-purple glow of the gro-light tubes that seemed to dangle at random from the ceiling. "What took you bitches?" the 'wareman asked, but there was no anger in his voice, only bone weariness and something else, something Bobby couldn't identify at first.

"Pye," Jackie said, swaggering past the wheelchair to take a package of Chinese cigarettes from the enormous wooden slab that served Two-a-Day as a coffee table. "He's a perfectionist, ol' Pye."

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"Learned that in vet school," Rhea added, for Bobby's benefit, " 'cept usually he's too wasted, nobody'd let him work on a dog . . ."

"So," Two-a-Day said, and finally let his eyes rest on Bobby, "you gonna make it." And his eyes were so cold, so tired and clinical, so far removed from the hustling manic bullshitter's act that Bobby had taken for the man's personality, that Bobby could only lower his own eyes, face burning, and lock his gaze on the table. Nearly three meters long and slightly over a meter wide, it was strapped together from timbers thicker than Bobby's thigh. It must have been in the water once, he thought; sections still retained the bleached silvery patina of driftwood, like the log he remembered playing beside a long time ago in Atlantic City. But it hadn't seen water for a long time, and the top was a dense mosaic of candle-drippings, wine stains, oddly shaped overspray marks in matte black enamel, and the dark burns left by hundreds of cigarettes. It was so crowded with food, garbage, and gadgets that it looked as though some street vendor had set up to unload hardware, then decided to have dinner. There were half-eaten pizzas—krill balls in red sauce, and Bobby's stomach began to churn—beside cascading stacks of software, smudged glasses with cigarettes crushed out in purple wine-dregs, a pink styrene tray with neat rows of stale-looking canapes, open and unopened cans of beer, an antique Gerber combat dagger that lay unsheathed on a flat block of polished marble, at least three pistols, and perhaps two dozen pieces of cryptic-looking console gear, the kind of cowboy equipment that ordinarily would have made Bobby's mouth water.

Now his mouth was watering for a slice of cold krill pizza, but his hunger was nothing in the face of his abrupt humiliation at seeing that Two-a-Day just didn't care. Not that Bobby had thought of him as a friend, exactly, but he'd definitely had something invested in the idea that Two-a-Day saw him as *someone,* somebody with talent and initiative and a chance of getting out of Barrytown. But Two-a-Day's eyes told him he was nobody in particular, and a wilson at that . . .

"Look here, my man," someone said, not Two-a-Day, and Bobby looked up. Two other men flanked Two-a-Day on the fat chrome and leather couch, both of them black. The one who'd spoken wore a gray robe of some kind and antique plastic-framed glasses. The frames were square and oversized and seemed to lack lenses. The other man's shoulders were twice as wide as Two-a-Day's, but he wore the kind of plain black two-piece suit you saw on Japanese businessmen in kinos. His spotless white French cuffs were closed with bright rectangles of gold micro-circuitry. "It's a shame we can't let you have some down time to heal up," the first man said, "but we have a bad problem here." He paused, removed his glasses, and massaged the bridge of his nose. "We require your help."

"Shit," Two-a-Day said. He leaned forward, took a Chinese cigarette

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from the pack on the table, lit it with a dull pewter skull the size of a large lemon, then reached for a glass of wine. The man with the glasses extended a lean brown forefinger and touched Two-a-Day's wrist. Two-a-Day released the glass and sat back, his face carefully blank. The man smiled at Bobby. "Count Zero," he said, "They tell us that's your handle."

"That's right," Bobby managed, though it came out as a kind of croak.

"We need to know about the Virgin, Count." The man waited.

Bobby blinked at him.

"Vyèj Mirak," and the glassless glasses went back on, "Our Lady, Virgin of Miracles. We know her," and he made a sign with his left hand, "as Ezili Freda . . ."

Bobby became aware of the fact that his mouth was open, so he closed it. The three faces waited. Jackie and Rhea were gone, but he hadn't seen them leave. A kind of panic took him then, and he glanced frantically around at the strange forest of stunted trees that surrounded them. The gro-light tubes slanted at every angle, in any direction, pink-purple jackstraws suspended in a green space of leaves. No walls. You couldn't see a wall at all. The couch and the battered table sat in a sort of clearing, with a floor of raw concrete.

"We know she came to you," the big man said, crossing his legs carefully. He adjusted a perfect trouser-crease and a gold cufflink winked at Bobby. "We know, you understand?"

"Two-a-Day tells me it was your first run," the other man said. "That the truth?"

Bobby nodded.

"Then you are chosen of Legba," the man said, again removing the empty frames, "to have met Vyèj Mirak." He smiled.

Bobby's mouth was open again.

"Legba," the man said, "master of roads and pathways, the loa of communication . . ."

Two-a-Day ground his cigarette out on the scarred wood, and Bobby saw that his hand was shaking.

10
ALAIN

The agreed to meet in the brasserie on the fifth sub-level of the Napoleon Court complex, beneath the Louvre's glass pyramid. It was a place they both knew, although it had had no particular meaning for them. Alain had suggested it, and she suspected him of having chosen it carefully. It was neutral emotional ground; a familiar setting, yet one that was free of memories. It was decorated in a style that dated from the

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turn of the century: granite counters, black floor-to-ceiling beams, wall-to-wall mirror, and the sort of Italian restaurant furniture, in dark welded steel, that might have belonged to any decade of the past hundred years. The tables were covered in gray linen with a fine black stripe, a pattern picked up and repeated on the menu-covers and matchbooks and the aprons of the waiters.

She wore the leather coat she'd bought in Brussels, a red linen blouse, and new black cotton jeans. Andrea had pretended not to notice the extreme care with which she'd dressed for the meeting, and then had loaned her a simple single strand of pearls which set off the red blouse perfectly.

He'd come early, she saw, as she entered, and already the table was littered with his things. He wore his favorite scarf, the one they'd found together at the flea market the year before, and looked, as he usually did, disheveled but perfectly at ease. The tattered leather attaché case had disgorged its contents across the little square of polished granite: spiral notebooks, an unread copy of the month's controversial novel, Gauloise nonfilters, a box of wooden matches, the leather-bound agenda she'd bought for him at Browns.

"I thought you might not come," he said, smiling up at her.

"Why would you have thought that?" she asked, a random response—pathetic, she thought—masking the terror she now felt, that she allowed herself at last to feel, which was fear of some loss of self, of will and direction, fear of the love she still felt. She took the other chair and seated herself as the young waiter arrived, a Spanish boy in a striped apron, to take her order. She asked for Vichy water.

"Nothing else?" Alain asked. The waiter hovered.

"No, thank you."

"I've been trying to reach you for weeks," he said, and she knew that that was a lie, and yet, as she often had before, she wondered if he was entirely conscious of the fact that he was lying. Andrea maintained that men like Alain lied so constantly, so passionately, that some basic distinction had been lost. They were artists in their own right, Andrea said, intent on restructuring reality, and the New Jerusalem was a fine place indeed, free of overdrafts and disgruntled landlords and the need to find someone to cover the evening's bill.

"I didn't notice you trying to reach me when Gnass came with the police," she said, hoping at least that he would wince, but the boyish face was calm as ever, beneath clean brown hair he habitually combed back with his fingers.

"I'm sorry," he said, crushing out his Gauloise. Because she'd come to associate the smell of the dark French tobacco with him, Paris had seemed full of his scent, his ghost, his trail. "I was certain he'd never detect

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the—the nature of the piece. You must understand: once I had admitted to myself how badly we needed the money, I knew that I must act. You, I knew, were far too idealistic. The gallery would have folded in any case. If things had gone as planned, with Gnass, we would be there now, and you would be happy. Happy," he repeated, taking another cigarette from the pack.

She could only stare at him, feeling a kind of wonder, and a sick revulsion at her desire to believe him.

"You know," he said, taking a match from the red and yellow box, "I've had difficulties with the police before. When I was a student. Politics, of course." He struck the match, tossed the box down, and lit the cigarette.

"Politics," she said, and suddenly felt like laughing. "I was unaware that there was a party for people like you. I can't imagine what it might be called."

"Marly," he said, lowering his voice, as he always did when he wished to indicate intensity of feeling, "you know, you must know, that I acted for you. For us, if you will. But surely you know, you can *feel,* Marly, that I would never deliberately hurt you, or place you in jeopardy." There was no room on the crowded little table for her purse, so she'd held it in her lap; now she was aware of her nails buried deep in the soft thick leather.

"Never hurt me . . ." The voice was her own, lost and amazed, the voice of a child, and suddenly she was free, free of need, desire, free of fear, and all that she felt for the handsome face across the table was simple revulsion, and she could only stare at him, this stranger she'd slept beside for one year, in a tiny room behind a very small gallery in the rue Mauconseil. The waiter put her glass of Vichy down in front of her.

He must have taken her silence for the beginning of acceptance, the utter blankness of her expression for openness. "What you don't understand," and this, she remembered, was a favorite opening, "is that men like Gnass exist, in some sense, to support the arts. To support *us,* Marly." He smiled then, as though he laughed at himself, a jaunty, conspiratorial smile that chilled her now. "I suppose, though, that I should have credited the man with having at least the requisite sense to hire his own Cornell expert, although *my* Cornell expert, I assure you, was by far the more erudite of the two . . ."

How was she to get away? Stand, she told herself. Turn. Walk calmly back to the entrance. Step through the door. Out into the subdued glitter of Napoleon Court, where polished marble overlay the rue de Champ Fleuri, a 14th-century street said to have been reserved primarily for prostitution. Anything, anything, only go, only leave, now, and be away, away from him, walking blind, to lose herself in the guidebook Paris she'd learned when she'd first come here.

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"But now," he was saying, "you can see that things have worked out for the best. It's often like that, isn't it?" Again, the smile, but this time it was boyish, slightly wistful, and somehow, horribly, more intimate. "We've lost the gallery, but you've found employment, Marly. You have a job to do, an interesting one, and I have the connections you'll need, Marly. I know the people you'll need to meet, in order to find your artist."

"My artist?" Covering her abrupt confusion with a sip of Vichy.

He opened his scarred attaché and removed something flat, a simple reflection hologram. She took it, grateful to have something to do with her hands, and saw that it was a casual shot of the box she'd seen in Virek's construct of Barcelona. Someone was holding it forward. A man's hands, not Alain's, and on one of them, a signet ring of some dark metal. The background was lost. Only the box, and the hands.

"Alain," she said, "where did you get this?" Looking up to meet brown eyes filled with a terrible childlike triumph.

"It's going to cost someone a very great deal to find out." He ground out his cigarette and stood. "Excuse me." He walked away, headed in the direction of the restrooms. As he vanished, behind mirrors and black steel beams, she dropped the hologram, reached across the table, and flipped back the lid of his attaché. There was nothing there, only a blue elastic band and some crumbs of tobacco.

"May I bring you something else? More Vichy, perhaps?" The waiter stood beside her.

She looked up at him, struck suddenly by a sense of familiarity. The lean dark face . . .

"He's wearing a broadcast unit," the waiter said. "He's armed, as well. I was the bellman in Brussels. Give him what he wants. Remember that the money means nothing to you." He took her glass and placed it carefully on his tray. "And, very likely, it will destroy him."

When Alain returned, he was smiling.

"Now, darling," he said, reaching for his cigarettes, "we can do business."

Marly smiled back and nodded.

11
ON SITE

He allowed himself three hours of sleep, finally, in the windowless bunker where the point team had established the command post. He'd met the rest of the site team. Ramirez was slight, nervous, perpetually wired on his own skill as a console jockey; they were depending on him, along with Jaylene Slide on the offshore rig, to monitor cyberspace

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around the grid-sector that held the heavily iced banks of Maas Biolabs; if Maas became aware of them, at the last moment, he might be able to provide some warning. He was also charged with relaying the medical data from the surgery to the offshore rig, a complex procedure if they were to keep it from Maas. The line out ran to a phonebooth in the middle of nowhere. Once past that booth, he and Jaylene were on their own in the matrix. If they blew it, Maas could backtrack and pinpoint the site. And then there was Nathan, the repairman, whose real job consisted of watching over the gear in the bunker. If some part of their system went down, there was at least a chance he could fix it. Nathan belonged to the species that had produced Oakey and a thousand others Turner had worked with over the years, maverick techs who liked earning danger money and had proven they could keep their mouths shut. The others, Compton, Teddy, Costa, and Davis, were just expensive muscle, mercs, the sort of men you hired for a job like this. For their benefit, he'd taken particular care in questioning Sutcliffe about the arrangements for clear-out. He'd explained where the copters would come in, the order of pick-up, and precisely how and when they would be paid.

Then he'd told them to leave him alone in the bunker, and ordered Webber to wake him in three hours.

The place had been either a pumphouse or some sort of nexus for electrical wiring. The stumps of plastic tubing that protruded from the walls might have been conduit or sewage line; the room provided no evidence that any of them had ever been connected to anything. The ceiling, a single slab of poured concrete, was too low to allow him to stand, and there was a dry, dusty smell that wasn't entirely pleasant. The team had swept the place before they brought in the tables and the equipment, but there were still a few yellow flakes of newsprint on the floor, that crumbled when he touched them. He made out letters, sometimes an entire word.

Each of the folding metal camp tables had been set up along a wall, forming an L, each arm supporting an array of extraordinarily sophisticated communications gear. The best, he thought, that Hosaka had been able to obtain.

He hunched his way carefully along the length of each table, tapping each console, each black box, lightly as he went. There was a heavily modified military sideband transceiver rigged for squirt transmission. This would be their link in case Ramirez and Jaylene flubbed the data-transfer. The squirts were pre-recorded, elaborate technical fictions encoded by Hosaka's cryptographers. The content of a given squirt was meaningless, but the sequence in which they were broadcast would convey simple messages. Sequence B/C/A would inform Hosaka of Mitchell's arrival; D/F would indicate his departure from the site, while F/G would

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signal his death and the concurrent closure of the operation. Turner tapped the sideband rig again, frowning. He wasn't pleased with Sutcliffe's arrangements, there. If the extraction was blown, it wasn't likely they'd get out, let alone get out clean, and Webber had quietly informed him that, in the event of trouble, she'd been ordered to use a hand-held anti-tank rocket on the medicals in their miniature surgery. "They know," she said. "You can bet they're getting paid for it, too." The rest of them were depending on the helicopters, which were based near Tucson. Turner assumed that Maas, if alerted, could easily take them out as they came in. When he'd objected to Sutcliffe, the Australian had only shrugged: "It isn't the way I'd set it up under the best circumstances, mate, but we're all in here on short notice, aren't we?"

Beside the transceiver was an elaborate Sony biomonitor, linked directly with the surgical pod and charged with the medical history recorded in Mitchell's biosoft dossier. The medicals, when the time came, would access the defector's history; simultaneously, the procedures they carried out in the pod would be fed back to the Sony and collated, ready for Ramirez to ice them and shift them out into cyberspace, where Jaylene Slide would be riding shotgun from her seat in the oil rig. If it all went smoothly, the medical update would be waiting in Hosaka's Mexico City compound when Turner brought him in in the jet. Turner had never seen anything quite like the Sony, but he supposed the Dutchman would have had something very similar in his Singapore clinic. The thought brought his hand to his bare chest, where he unconsciously traced the vanished line of a graft-scar.

The second table supported the cyberspace gear. The deck was identical with the one he'd seen on the oil rig, a Maas-Neotek prototype. The deck-configuration was standard, but Conroy had said that it was built up from the new biochips. There was a fist-sized lump of pale pink plastique squashed on top of the console; someone, perhaps Ramirez, had thumbed in twin depressions for eyes and a crude curve of idiot grin. Two wires, one blue, the other yellow, ran from the thing's pink forehead to one of the black, gaping tubes that protruded from the wall behind the console. Another of Webber's chores, if there seemed any danger of the site being overrun. Turner eyed the wires, frowning; a charge that size, in that small, enclosed space, guaranteed death for anyone in the bunker.

His shoulders aching, the back of his head brushing the rough concrete of the ceiling, he continued his inspection. The rest of the table was taken up with the deck's peripherals, a series of black boxes positioned with obsessive precision. He suspected that each unit was a certain specific distance from its neighbor, and that they were perfectly aligned. Ramirez himself would have set them out, and Turner was certain that if he touched one, moved it the least fraction, the jockey would know. He'd

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seen that same neurotic touch before, in other console men, and it told him nothing about Ramirez. He'd watched other jockeys who reversed the trait, deliberately tangling their gear in a rat's nest of leads and cable, who were terrified of tidiness and plastered their consoles with decals of dice and screaming skulls. There was no way to tell, he thought; either Ramirez was good, or else they all might be dead soon.

At the far end of the table were five Telefunken ear-bead transceivers with adhesive throat-mikes, still sealed in individual bubble-packs. During the crucial phase of the defection, which Turner took to be the twenty minutes on either side of Mitchell's arrival, he, Ramirez, Sutcliffe, Webber, and Lynch would be linked, although use of the transceivers was to be kept to an absolute minimum.

Behind the Telefunkens was an unmarked plastic carton that contained twenty Swedish catalytic handwarmers, smooth flat oblongs of stainless steel, each in its own drawstring bag of Christmas-red flannelette. "You're a clever bastard," he said to the carton. "I might have thought that one up myself . . ."

He slept on a corrugated foam hiker's pad on the floor of the command post, using the parka as a blanket. Conroy had been right about the desert night, but the concrete seemed to hold the day's heat. He left his fatigues and shoes on; Webber had advised him to shake his shoes and clothing out, whenever he dressed. "Scorpions," she'd said, "they like sweat, any kind of moisture . . ." He removed the Smith & Wesson from the nylon holster before he lay down, carefully positioning it beside the foam pad. He left the two battery-lanterns on, and closed his eyes . . .

And slid into a shallow sea of dream, images tossing past, fragments of Mitchell's dossier melding with bits of his own life . . . He and Mitchell drove a bus through a cascade of plate glass, into the lobby of a Marrakech hotel. The scientist whooped as he pressed the button that detonated the two dozen cannisters of CN taped along the flanks of the vehicle, and Oakey was there too, offering him whiskey from a bottle, and yellow Peruvian cocaine on a round, plastic-rimmed mirror he'd last seen in Allison's purse. He thought he saw Allison somewhere beyond the windows of the bus, choking in the clouds of gas, and he tried to tell Oakey, tried to point her out, but the glass was plastered with Mexican holograms of saints, postcards of the Virgin, and Oakey was holding up something smooth and round, a globe of pink crystal, and he saw a spider crouched at its core, a spider made of quicksilver, but Mitchell was laughing, his teeth full of blood, and extending his open palm to offer Turner the gray biosoft. Turner saw that the dossier was a brain, grayish-pink and alive beneath a wet clear membrane, pulsing softly in Mitchell's

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hand, and then he tumbled over some submarine ledge of dream and settled smoothly down into a night with no stars at all.

Webber woke him, her hard features framed in the square doorway, her shoulders draped in the heavy military blanket taped across the entrance. "Got your three hours. The medicals are up, if you want to talk to 'em . . ." She withdrew, her boots crunching gravel.

Hosaka's medics were waiting beside the self-contained neurosurgery. Under a desert dawn they looked as though they'd just stepped from some kind of matter-transmitter in their fashionably rumpled Ginza casuals. One of the men was bundled in an oversized Mexican handknit, the sort of belted cardigan Turner had seen tourists wear in Mexico City. The other two wore expensive-looking insulated ski-jackets against the desert cold. The men were a head shorter than the Korean, a slender woman with strong, archaic features and a bird-like ruff of red-tinged hair that made Turner think of raptors. Conroy had said that the two were company men, and Turner could see it easily; only the woman had the attitude, the stance that belonged to Turner's world, and she was an outlaw, a black medic. She'd be right at home with the Dutchman, he thought.

"I'm Turner," he said, "I'm in charge here."

"You don't need our names," the woman said, as the two Hosaka men bowed automatically. They exchanged glances, looked at Turner, then looked back to the Korean.

"No," Turner said, "it isn't necessary."

"Why are we still denied access to the patient's medical data?" the Korean asked.

"Security," Turner said, the answer very nearly an automatic response. In fact, he could see no reason to prevent them from studying Mitchell's records.

The woman shrugged, turned away, her face hidden by the upturned collar of her insulated jacket.

"Would you like to inspect the surgery?" the man in the bulky cardigan asked, his face polite and alert, a perfect corporate mask.

"No," Turner said. "We'll be moving you out to the lot twenty minutes prior to his arrival. We'll take the wheels off, level you with jacks. The sewage link will be disconnected. I want you fully operational five minutes after we set you down."

"There will be no problem," the other man said, smiling.

"Now I want you to tell me what you're going to be doing in there, what you'll do to him and how it might affect him."

"You don't *know?*" the woman asked sharply, turning back to face him.

"I said that I wanted you to tell me," Turner said.

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"We'll conduct an immediate scan for lethal implants," the man in the cardigan said.

"Cortex charges, that sort of thing?"

"I doubt," said the other man, "that we will encounter anything so crude, but yes, we will be scanning for the full range of lethal devices. Simultaneously, we'll run a full blood-screen. We understand that his current employers deal in extremely sophisticated biochemical systems. It would seem possible that the greatest danger would lie in that direction . . ."

"It's currently quite fashionable to equip top employees with modified insulin-pump subdermals," his partner broke in. "The subject's system can be tricked into an artificial reliance on certain synthetic enzyme analogs. Unless the subdermal is recharged at regular intervals, withdrawal from the source—the employer—can result in trauma . . ."

"We are prepared to deal with that as well," said the other.

"Neither of you are even remotely prepared to deal with what I suspect we will encounter," the black medic said, her voice cold as the wind that blew out of the east now. Turner heard sand hissing across the rusted sheet of steel above them.

"You," Turner said to her, "come with me." Then he turned, without looking back, and walked away. It was possible that she might not obey his command, in which case he'd lose face with the other two, but it seemed the right move. When he was ten meters from the surgery pod, he halted. He heard her feet on the gravel.

"What do you know?" he asked, without turning.

"Perhaps no more than you do," she said, "perhaps more."

"More than your colleagues, obviously."

"They are extremely talented men. They are also . . . servants."

"And you are not."

"Neither are you, mercenary. I was hired out of the finest unlicensed clinic in Chiba for this. I was given a great deal of material to study in preparation for my meeting with this illustrious patient. The black clinics of Chiba are the cutting edge of medicine; not even Hosaka could know that my position in black medicine would allow me to guess what it is that your defector carries in his head. The street tries to find its own uses for things, Mr. Turner. Already, several times, I've been hired to attempt the removal of these new implants. A certain amount of advanced Maas biocircuitry has found its way into the market. These attempts at implanting are a logical step. I suspect Maas may leak these things deliberately . . ."

"Then explain it to me."

"I don't think I could," she said, and there was a strange hint of resignation in her voice. "I told you I've seen it. I didn't say that I understood

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it." Fingertips suddenly brushed the skin beside his skull-jack. "This, compared with biochip implants, is like a wooden staff beside a myo-electric limb."

"But will it be life-threatening, in his case?"

"Oh, no," she said, withdrawing her hand, "not for *him* . . . " And then he heard her trudging back toward the surgery.

Conroy sent a runner in with the software package that would allow Turner to pilot the jet that would carry Mitchell to Hosaka's Mexico City compound. The runner was a wild-eyed, sun-blackened man Lynch called Harry, a rope-muscled apparition who came cycling in from the direction of Tucson on a sand-scoured bike with balding lug tires and bone-yellow rawhide laced around its handlebars. Lynch led Harry across the parking lot. Harry was singing to himself, a strange sound in the enforced quiet of the site, and his song, if you could call it that, was like someone randomly tuning a broken radio up and down midnight miles of dial, bringing in gospel shouts and snatches of twenty years of international pop. Harry had his bike slung across one burnt, bird-thin shoulder.

"Harry's got something for you from Tucson," Lynch said.

"You two know each other?" Turner asked, looking at Lynch. "Maybe have a friend in common?"

"What's that supposed to mean?" Lynch asked.

Turner held his stare. "You know his name."

"He told me his fucking name, Turner."

"Name's Harry," the burnt man said. He tossed the bicycle down on a clump of brush. He smiled vacantly, exposing badly spaced, eroded teeth. His bare chest was filmed with sweat and dust, and hung with loops of fine steel chain, rawhide, bits of animal horn and fur, brass cartridge casings, copper coins worn smooth and faceless with use, and a small pouch made of soft brown leather.

Turner looked at the assortment of things strung across the skinny chest and reached out, flipping a crooked bit of bent gristle suspended from a length of braided string. "What the hell is that, Harry?"

"That's a coon's pecker," Harry said. "Coon's got him a jointed bone in his pecker. Not many as know that."

"You ever meet my friend Lynch before, Harry?"

Harry blinked.

"He had the passwords," Lynch said. "There's an urgency-hierarchy. He knew the top. He told me his name. Do you need me here, or can I get back to work?"

"Go," Turner said.

When Lynch was out of earshot, Harry began to work at the thongs that sealed the leather pouch. "You shouldn't be harsh with the boy," he

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said. "He's really very good. I actually didn't see him until he had that fletcher up against my neck." He opened the pouch and fished delicately inside.

"Tell Conroy I've got him pegged."

"Sorry," Harry said, extracting a folded sheet of yellow notebook paper from his pouch. "You've got who pegged?" He hand it to Turner; there was something inside.

"Lynch. He's Conroy's bumboy on the site. Tell him." He unfolded the paper and removed the fat military microsoft. There was a note in blue capitals: BREAK A LEG, ASSHOLE. SEE YOU IN THE DF.

"Do you really want me to tell him that?"

"Tell him."

"You're the boss."

"You fucking know it," Turner said, crumpling the paper and thrusting it into Harry's left armpit. Harry smiled, sweetly and vacantly, and the intelligence that had risen in him settled again, like some aquatic beast sinking effortlessly down into a smooth sea of sun-addled vapidity. Turner stared into his eyes, cracked yellow opals, and saw nothing there but sun and the broken highway. A hand with missing joints came up to scratch absently at a week's growth of beard. "Now," Turner said. Harry turned, pulled his bike up from the tangle of brush, shouldered it with a grunt, and began to make his way back across the ruined parking lot. His oversized, tattered khaki shorts flapped as he went, and his collection of chains rattled softly.

Sutcliffe whistled from a rise twenty meters away, held up a roll of orange surveyor's tape. It was time to start laying out Mitchell's landing strip. They'd have to work quickly, before the sun was too high, and still it was going to be hot.

"So," Webber said, "he's coming in by air." She spat brown juice on a yellowed cactus. Her cheek was packed with Copenhagen snuff.

"You got it," Turner said. He sat beside her on a ledge of buff shale. They were watching Lynch and Nathan clear the strip he and Sutcliffe had laid out with the orange tape. The tape marked out a rectangle four meters wide and twenty long. Lynch carried a length of rusted I-beam to the tape and heaved it over. Something scurried away through the brush as the beam rang on concrete.

"They can see that tape, if they want to," Webber said, wiping her lips with the back of her hand. "Read the headlines on your morning fax, if they want to."

"I know," Turner said, "but if they don't know we're here already, I don't think they're going to. And you couldn't see it from the highway." He adjusted the black nylon cap Ramirez had given him, pulling the long

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bill down until it touched his sunglasses. "Anyway, we're just moving the heavy stuff, the things that could tear a leg off. It isn't going to look like anything, not from orbit."

"No," Webber agreed, her seamed face impassive beneath her sunglasses. He could smell her sweat from where she sat, sharp and animal.

"What the hell do you do, Webber, when you aren't doing this?" He looked at her.

"Probably a hell of a lot more than you do," she said. "Part of the time, I breed dogs." She took a knife from her boot and began to strop it patiently on her sole, flipping it smoothly with each stroke, like a Mexican barber sharpening a razor. "And I fish. Trout."

"You have people, in New Mexico?"

"Probably more than you've got," she said, flatly. "I figure the ones like you and Sutcliffe, you aren't from any place at all. This is where you live, isn't it, Turner? On the site, today, the day your boy comes out. Right?" She tested the blade against the ball of her thumb, then slid it back into its sheath.

"But you have people? You got a man to go back to?"

"A woman, you want to know," she said. "Know anything about breeding dogs?"

"No," he said.

"I didn't think so." She squinted at him. "We got a kid, too. Ours. She carried it."

"DNA splice?"

She nodded.

"That's expensive," he said.

"You know it; wouldn't be here if we didn't need to pay it off. But she's beautiful."

"Your woman?"

"Our kid."

12
CAFÉ BLANC

As she walked from the Louvre, she seemed to sense some articulate structure shifting to accommodate her course through the city. The waiter would be merely a part of the thing, one limb, a delicate probe or palp. The whole would be larger, much larger. How could she have imagined that it would be possible to live, to move, in the unnatural field of Virek's wealth without suffering distortion? Virek had taken her up, in all her misery, and had rotated her through the monstrous, invisible stresses of his money, and she had been changed. Of course, she thought,

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of course: it moves around me constantly, watchful and invisible, the vast and subtle mechanism of Herr Virek's surveillance.

Eventually she found herself on the pavement below the terrace of the Blanc. It seemed as good a place as any. A month before, she would have avoided it; she'd spent too many evenings with Alain there. Now, feeling that she had been freed, she decided to begin the process of rediscovering her own Paris by choosing a table at the Blanc. She took one near a side-screen. She asked a waiter for a cognac, and shivered, watching the Paris traffic flow past, perpetual river of steel and glass, while all around her, at other tables, strangers ate and smiled, drank and argued, said bitter goodbyes or swore private fealties to an afternoon's feeling.

But—she smiled—she was a part of it all. Something in her was waking from a long and stifled sleep, brought back into the light in the instant she'd fully opened her eyes to Alain's viciousness and her own desperate need to continue loving him. But that need was fading, even as she sat here. The shabbiness of his lies, somehow, had broken the chains of her depression. She could see no logic to it, because she had known, in some part of herself, and long before the business with Gnass, exactly what it was that Alain did in the world, and that had made no difference to her love. In the face of this new feeling, however, she would forego logic. It was enough, to be here, alive, at a table in the Blanc, and to imagine all around her the intricate machine that she now knew Virek had deployed.

Ironies, she thought, seeing the young waiter from Napoleon Court step up onto the terrace. He wore the dark trousers he had worked in, but the apron had been replaced with a blue windbreaker. Dark hair fell across his forehead in a smooth wing. He came toward her, smiling, confident, knowing that she wouldn't run. There was something in her then that wanted very badly to run, but she knew that she wouldn't. Irony, she told herself: as I luxuriate in the discovery that I am no special sponge for sorrow, but merely another fallible animal in this stone maze of a city, I come simultaneously to see that I am the focus of some vast device fueled by an obscure desire.

"My name is Paco," he said, pulling out the white-painted iron chair opposite her own.

"You were the child, the boy, in the park . . ."

"A long time ago, yes." He sat. "Señor has preserved the image of my childhood."

"I have been thinking, about your Señor." She didn't look at him, but at the passing cars, cooling her eyes in the flow of traffic, the colors of polycarbon and painted steel. "A man like Virek is incapable of divesting himself of his wealth. His money has a life of its own. Perhaps a will of its own. He implied as much, when we met."

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"You are a philosopher."

"I'm a tool, Paco. I'm the most recent tip for a very old machine in the hands of a very old man, one who wishes to penetrate something and has so far failed to do so. Your employer fumbles through a thousand tools, and somehow chooses me . . ."

"You are a poet as well!"

She laughed, taking her eyes from the traffic; he was grinning, his mouth bracketed in deep vertical grooves. "While I walked here, I imagined a structure, a machine so large that I am incapable of seeing it. A machine that surrounds me, anticipating my every step."

"And you are an egotist as well?"

"Am I?"

"Perhaps not. Certainly, you are observed. We watch, and it is well that we do. Your friend in the brasserie, we watch him as well. Unfortunately, we've been unable to determine where he obtained the hologram he showed you. Very likely, he already had it when he began to phone your friend's number. Someone got to him, do you understand? Someone has put him in your way. Don't you think that this is most intriguing? Doesn't it pique the philosopher in you?"

"Yes, I suppose it does. I took the advice you gave me, in the brasserie, and agreed to his price."

"Then he will double it." Paco smiled.

"Which is of no importance to me, as you pointed out. He has agreed to contact me tomorrow. I assume that you can arrange the delivery of the money. He asked for cash."

"Cash," and he rolled his eyes, "how risqué! But, yes I can. And I know the details, as well. We were monitoring the conversation. Not difficult, as he was helpful enough to broadcast it himself, from a bead-microphone. We were anxious to learn who that broadcast was intended for, but we doubt he knows that himself . . ."

"It was unlike him," she said, frowning, "to excuse himself, to break off that way, before he had made his demands. He fancies he has a flair for the dramatic moment."

"He had no choice," Paco said. "We engineered what he took to be a failure of the bead's power source. It required a trip to the hommes, then. He said very nasty things about you, alone in the cubicle."

She gestured to her empty glass as a waiter passed. "I still find it difficult to see my part in this, my value. To Virek, I mean."

"Don't ask me. You are the philosopher, here. I merely execute Señor's orders, to the best of my ability."

"Would you like a brandy, Paco? Or perhaps some coffee?"

"The French," he said, with great conviction, "know nothing about coffee."

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13
WITH BOTH HANDS

"Maybe you can run that one by me again," Bobby said, around a mouthful of rice and eggs. "I thought you already said it's not a religion."

Beauvoir removed his eyeglass-frames and sighted down one of the ear-pieces. "That wasn't what I said. I said you didn't have to worry about it, is all, whether it's a religion or not. It's just a *structure*. Let's you an' me discuss some things that are happening, otherwise we might not have words for it, concepts . . ."

"But you talk like these, whatchacallem, *lows*, are—"

"Loa," Beauvoir corrected, tossing his glasses down on the table. He sighed, dug one of the Chinese cigarettes from Two-a-Day's pack, and lit it with the pewter skull. "Plural's same as the singular." He inhaled deeply, blew out twin streams of smoke through arched nostrils. "You think religion, what are you thinking about, exactly?"

"Well, my mother's sister, she's a Scientologist, real orthodox, you know? And there's this woman across the hall, she's Catholic. My old lady," and he paused, the food gone tasteless in his mouth, "she'd put these holograms up in my room sometimes, Jesus or Hubbard. I guess I think about that."

"Vodou isn't like that," Beauvoir said. "It isn't concerned with notions of salvation and transcendence. What it's about is getting things *done*. You follow me? In our system, there are *many* gods, spirits. Part of one big family, with all the virtues, all the vices. There's a ritual tradition of communal manifestation, understand? Vodou says, there's God, sure, Gran Mèt, but He's big, too big and too far away to worry Himself if your ass is poor, or you can't get laid. Come on, man, you know how this works, it's *street* religion, came out of a dirtpoor place a million years ago. Vodou's like the street. Some duster chops out your sister, you don't go camp on the Yakuza's doorstep, do you? No way. You go to somebody, though, who can get the thing *done*. Right?"

Bobby nodded, chewing thoughtfully. Another derm and two glasses of the red wine had helped a lot, and the big man had taken Two-a-Day for a walk through the trees and the fluorescent jackstraws, leaving Bobby with Beauvoir. Then Jackie had shown up all cheerful, with a big bowl of this eggs-and-rice stuff, which wasn't bad at all, and as she'd put it down on the table in front of him, she'd pressed one of her breasts against his shoulder.

"So," Beauvoir said, "we are concerned with getting things done. If you want, we're concerned with systems. And so are you, or at least you want to be, or else you wouldn't be a cowboy and you wouldn't have a handle, right?"

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He dunked what was left of the cigarette in a fingerprinted glass half full of red wine. "Looks like Two-a-Day was about to get down to serious partying, about the time the shit hit the fan."

"What shit's that?" Bobby asked, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand.

"You," Beauvoir said, frowning. "Not that any of it is your fault. As much as Two-a-Day wants to make out that's the case."

"He does? He seems pretty tense now. Real bitchy, too."

"Exactly. You got it. Tense. Scared shitless is more like it."

"So how come?"

"Well, you see, things aren't exactly what they seem, with Two-a-Day. I mean, yeah, he actually does the kind of stuff you've known him to, hustles hot software to the caspers, pardon me," and he grinned, "down in Barrytown, but his main shot, I mean the man's real ambitions, you understand, lie elsewhere." Beauvoir picked up a wilted canape, regarded it with evident suspicion, and flicked it over the table, into the trees. "His thing, you understand, is dicking around for a couple of bigtime Sprawl oungans."

Bobby nodded blankly.

"Dudes who serve with both hands."

"You lost me there."

"We're talking a professional priesthood here, you want to call it that. Otherwise, just imagine a couple of major dudes—console cowboys, among other things—who make it their business to get things done for people. 'To serve with both hands' is an expression we have, sort of means they work both ends. White and black, got me?"

Bobby swallowed, then shook his head.

"Sorcerers," Beauvoir said. "Never mind. Bad dudes, big money, that's all you need to know. Two-a-Day, he acts like an upline joeboy for these people. Sometimes he finds something they might be interested in, he downloads it on 'em, collects a few favors later. Maybe he collects a dozen too many favors, they download something on *him*. Not quite the same proposition, you follow me? Say they get something they think has potential, but it scares them. These characters tend to a certain conservatism, you see? No? Well, you'll learn."

Bobby nodded.

"The kind of software someone like you would rent from Two-a-Day, that's nothin'. I mean, it'll *work*, but it's nothing anybody heavy would ever bother with. You've seen a lot of cowboy kinos, right? Well, the stuff they make up for those things isn't much, compared with the kind of stuff a real heavy operator can front. Particularly when it comes to icebreakers. Heavy icebreakers are kind of funny to deal in, even for the big boys. You know why? Because ice, all the really hard stuff, the walls

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around every major store of data in the matrix, is always the product of an AI, an artificial intelligence. Nothing else is fast enough to weave good ice and constantly alter and upgrade it. So when a really powerful icebreaker shows up on the black market, there are already a couple of very dicey factors in play. Like, for starts, where did the product come from? Nine times out of ten, it came from an AI, and AI's are constantly screened, mainly by the Turing people, to make sure they don't get too smart. So maybe you'll get the Turing machine after your ass, because maybe an AI somewhere wants to augment its private cashflow. Some AI's have citizenship, right?

"Another thing you have to watch out for, maybe it's a *military* icebreaker, and that's bad heat too, or maybe it's taken a walk out of some zaibatsu's industrial espionage arm, and you don't want that either. You takin' this stuff in, Bobby?"

Bobby nodded. He felt like he'd been waiting all his life to hear Beauvoir explain the workings of a world whose existence he'd only guessed at before.

"Still, an icebreaker that'll really cut is worth mega, I mean *beaucoup*. So maybe you're Mr. Big in the market, someone offers you this thing, and you don't want to just tell 'em to take a walk. So you buy it. You buy it, real quiet, but you don't *slot* it, no. What do you do with it? You take it home, have your tech fix it up so that it looks real average. Like you have it set up in a format like this," and he tapped a stack of software in front of him, "and you take it to your joeboy, who owes you some favors, as usual . . ."

"Wait a sec," Bobby said. "I don't think I like—"

"Good. That means you're getting smart, or anyway smarter. Because that's what they did. They brought it out here to your friendly 'wareman, Mr. Two-a-Day, and they told him their problem. 'Ace,' they say, 'we want to check this shit out, testdrive it, but no way we gonna do it ourselves. It's down to you, boy.' So, in the way of things, what's Two-a-Day gonna do with it? Is *he* gonna slot it? No way at all. He just does the same damn thing the big boys did to him, 'cept he isn't even going to bother telling the guy he's going to do it to. What he does, he picks a base out in the midwest that's full of tax-dodge programs and yen-laundry flowcharts for some whorehouse in Kansas City, and everybody who didn't just fall off a tree *knows* that the fucker is eyeball-deep in ice, *black* ice, totally lethal feedback programs. There isn't a cowboy in the Sprawl or out who'd mess with that base, first because it's dripping with defenses, second because the stuff inside isn't worth anything to anybody but the IRS, and they're probably already on the owner's take."

"Hey," Bobby said, "lemme get this straight—"

"I'm *giving* it to you straight, white boy! He picked out that base, then

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he ran down his list of hotdoggers, ambitious punks from over in Barrytown, wilsons dumb enough to run a program they'd never seen before against a base that some joker like Two-a-Day fingered for them and told them was an easy make. And who's he pick? He picks somebody new to the game, natch, somebody who doesn't even know where he *lives,* doesn't even have his *number,* and he says, here, my man, you take this home and make yourself some money. You get anything good, I'll fence it for you!" Beauvoir's eyes were wide; he wasn't smiling. "Sound like anybody you know, man, or maybe you try not to hang out with losers?"

"You mean he knew I was going to get killed, if I plugged into that base?"

"No, Bobby, but he knew it was a possibility, if the package didn't work. What he mainly wanted was to watch you try. Which he didn't bother to do himself, just put a couple of cowboys on it. It could've gone a couple different ways. Say, if that icebreaker had done its number on the black ice, you'd have gotten in, found a bunch of figures that meant nothing to you, you'd have gotten back out, maybe without leaving any trace at all. Well, you'd have come back to Leon's and told Two-a-Day that he'd fingered the wrong data. Oh, he'd have been real apologetic, for sure, and you'd have gotten a new target and a new icebreaker, and he'd have taken the first one back to the Sprawl and said it looked okay. Meanwhile, he'd have an eye cocked in your direction, just to monitor your health, make sure nobody came looking for the icebreaker they might've heard you'd used. Another way it might have gone, the way it nearly did go, something could've been funny with the icebreaker, the ice could've fried you dead, and one of those cowboys would've had to break into your momma's place and get that software back before anybody found your body."

"I dunno, Beauvoir, that's pretty hard to—"

"Hard my ass. *Life* is hard. I mean, we're talkin' *biz,* you know?" Beauvoir regarded him with some severity, the plastic frames far down his slender nose. He was lighter than either Two-a-Day or the big man, the color of coffee with only a little whitener, his forehead high and smooth beneath close-cropped black frizz. He looked skinny, under his gray sharkskin robe, and Bobby didn't really find him threatening at all. "But our problem, the reason we're here, the reason you're here, is to figure out what *did* happen. And that's something else."

"But you mean he set me up, Two-a-Day set me up so I'd get my ass killed?" Bobby was still in the St. Mary's Maternity wheelchair, although he no longer felt like he needed it. "And he's in deep shit with these guys, these heavies from the Sprawl?"

"You got it now."

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"And that's why he was acting that way, like he doesn't give a damn, or maybe hates my guts, right? And he's real scared?"

Beauvoir nodded.

"And," Bobby said, suddenly seeing what Two-a-Day was really pissed about, and why he was scared, "it's because I got my ass jumped, down by Big Playground, and those Lobe fucks ripped me for my deck! And their software, it was still in my deck!" He leaned forward, excited at having put it together. "And these guys, it's like they'll kill him or something, unless he gets it back for them, right?"

"I can tell you watch a lot of kino," Beauvoir said, "but that's about the size of it, definitely."

"Right," Bobby said, settling back in the wheelchair and putting his bare feet up on the edge of the table. "Well, Beauvoir, who *are* these guys? Whatchacallem, hoonguns? Sorcerers, you said? What's that supposed to mean?"

"Well, Bobby," Beauvoir said, "I'm one, and the big fella, you can call him Lucas, he's the other."

"You've probably seen one of these before," Beauvoir said, as the man he called Lucas put the projection tank down on the table, having methodically cleared a space for it.

"In school," Bobby said.

"You go to school, man?" Two-a-Day snapped. "Why the hell didn't you stay there?" He'd been chainsmoking since he came back with Lucas, and seemed in worse shape than he'd been in before.

"Shut up, Two-a-Day," Beauvoir said. "Little education might do you some good."

"They used one to teach us our way around in the matrix, how to access stuff from the print library, like that . . ."

"Well then," Lucas said, straightening up and brushing nonexistent dust from his big pink palms, "did you ever use it for that, to access print books?" He'd removed his immaculate black suitcoat; his spotless white shirt was traversed by a pair of slender maroon suspenders, and he'd loosened the knot of his plain black tie.

"I don't read too well," Bobby said. "I mean, I can, but it's work. But yeah, I did. I looked at some real old books on the matrix and stuff."

"I thought you had," Lucas said, jacking some kind of small deck into the console that formed the base of the tank. "Count Zero. *Count zero interrupt.* Old programmer talk." He passed the deck to Beauvoir, who began to tap commands into it.

Complex geometric forms began to click into place in the tank, aligned with the nearly invisible planes of a three-dimensional grid. Beauvoir was sketching in the cyberspace coordinates for Barrytown, Bobby saw.

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"We'll call you this blue pyramid, Bobby. There you are." A blue pyramid began to pulse softly at the very center of the tank. "Now we'll show you what Two-a-Day's cowboys saw, the ones who were watching you. From now on, you're seeing a recording." An interrupted line of blue light extruded from the pyramid, following a grid-line. Bobby watched, seeing himself alone in his mother's living room, the Ono-Sendai on his lap, the curtains drawn, his fingers moving across the deck.

"Icebreaker on its way," Beauvoir said. The line of blue dots reached the wall of the tank. Beauvoir tapped the deck, and the coordinates changed. A new set of geometrics replaced the first arrangement. Bobby recognized the cluster of orange rectangles centered in the grid. "That's it," he said.

The blue line progressed from the edge of the tank, headed for the orange base. Faint planes of ghost-orange flickered around the rectangles, shifting and strobing, as the line grew closer.

"You can see something's wrong right there," Lucas said. "That's their ice, and it was already hip to you. Rumbled you before you even got a lock."

As the line of blue dots touched the shifting orange plane, it was surrounded by a translucent orange tube of slightly greater diameter. The tube began to lengthen, traveling back, along the line, until it reached the wall of the tank . . .

"Meanwhile," Beauvoir said, "back home in Barrytown . . ." He tapped the deck again and now Bobby's blue pyramid was in the center. Bobby watched as the orange tube emerged from the wall of the projection tank, still following the blue line, and smoothly approached the pyramid. "Now at this point, you were due to start doing some serious dying, cowboy." The tube reached the pyramid; triangular orange planes snapped up, walling it in. Beauvoir froze the projection.

"Now," Lucas said, "when Two-a-Day's hired help, who are all in all a pair of tough and experienced console jockeys, when they saw what you are about to see, my man, they decided that their deck was due for that big overhaul in the sky. Being pros, they had a back-up deck. When they brought it on line, they saw the same thing. It was at that point that they decided to phone their employer, Mr. Two-a-Day, who as we can see from this mess was about to throw himself a party . . ."

"Man," Two-a-Day said, his voice tight with hysteria, "I *told* you. I had some clients up here needed entertaining. I paid those boys to watch, they are watching, and they phoned me. I phoned you. What the hell you *want,* anyway?"

"Our property," Beauvoir said softly. "Now watch this, real close. This fucker is what we call an anomalous phenomenon, no shit . . ." He tapped the deck again, starting the recording.

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Liquid flowers of milky white blossomed from the floor of the tank; Bobby, craning forward, saw that they seemed to consist of thousands of tiny spheres or bubbles, and then they aligned perfectly with the cubical grid and coalesced, forming a top-heavy, asymmetrical structure, a thing like a rectilinear mushroom. The surfaces, facets, were white, perfectly blank. The image in the tank was no longer than Bobby's open hand, but to anyone jacked into a deck it would have been enormous. The thing unfolded a pair of horns; these lengthened, curved, became pincers that arced out to grasp the pyramid. He saw the tips sink smoothly through the flickering orange planes of the enemy ice.

"She said 'What are you doing?' " he heard himself say. "Then she asked me why they were doing that, doing it to me, killing me . . ."

"Ah," Beauvoir said, quietly, "now we are getting somewhere."

He didn't know where they were going, but he was glad to be out of that chair. Beauvoir ducked to avoid a slanting gro-light that dangled from twin lengths of curly-cord; Bobby followed, almost slipping in a green-filmed puddle of water. Away from Two-a-Day's couch-clearing, the air seemed thicker. There was a greenhouse smell of damp and growing things. "So that's how it was," Beauvoir said, "Two-a-Day sent some friends 'round to Covina Concourse Courts, but you were gone. Your deck was gone too."

"Well," Bobby said, "I don't see it's exactly his fault, then. I mean, if I hadn't split for Leon's—and I was *lookin'* for Two-a-Day, even lookin' to try to get up here—then he'd have found me, right?" Beauvoir paused to admire a leafy stand of flowering hemp, extending a thin brown forefinger to lightly brush the pale, colorless flowers.

"True," he said, "but this is a *business* matter. He should have detailed someone to watch your place for the duration of the run, to insure that neither you nor the software took any unscheduled walks."

"Well, he sent Rhea 'n' Jackie over to Leon's, because I saw 'em there." Bobby reached into the neck of his black pajamas and scratched at the sealed wound that crossed his chest and stomach. Then he remembered the centipede-thing Pye had used as a suture, and quickly withdrew his hand. It itched, a straight line of itch, but he didn't want to touch it.

"No, Jackie and Rhea are ours. Jackie is a mambo, a priestess, the horse of Danbala . . ." Beauvoir continued on his way, picking out what Bobby presumed was some existing track or path through the jumbled forest of hydroponics, although it seemed to progress in no particular direction. Some of the larger shrubs were rooted in bulbous green plastic trashbags filled with dark humus. Many of these had burst, and pale roots sought fresh nourishment in the shadows between the gro-lights, where time and the gradual fall of leaves conspired to produce a thin

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compost. Bobby wore a pair of black nylon thongs Jackie had found for him, but there was already damp earth between his toes. "A horse?" he asked Beauvoir, dodging past a prickly-looking thing that suggested an inside-out palmtree.

"Danbala rides her, Danbala Wedo, the snake. Other times, she is the horse of Aido Wedo, his wife."

Bobby decided not to pursue it. He tried to change the subject: "How come Two-a-Day's got such a motherhuge place? What are all these trees 'n' things for?" He knew that Jackie and Rhea had wheeled him through a doorway, in the St. Mary's chair, but he hadn't seen a wall since. He also knew that the arcology covered *x*-number of hectares, so that it was possible that Two-a-Day's place was very large indeed, but it hardly seemed likely that a 'wareman, even a very sharp one, could afford this much space. *Nobody* could afford this much space, and why would anybody want to live in a leaky hydroponic forest?

The last derm was wearing off, and his back and chest were beginning to ache.

"Ficus trees, mapou trees . . . This whole level of the Projects is a lieu saint, holy place." Beauvoir tapped Bobby on the shoulder and pointed out twisted, bi-colored strings dangling from the limbs of a nearby tree. "The trees are consecrated to different loa. That one is for Ougou, Ougou Feray, god of War. There's a lot of other things grown up here, herbs the leaf-doctors need, and some just for fun. But this isn't Two-a-Day's place, this is communal."

"You mean the whole Project's into this? All like voodoo and stuff?" It was worse than Marsha's darkest fantasies.

"No, man," and Beauvoir laughed. "There's a *mosque* up top, and a couple or ten thousand holyroller Baptists scattered around, some Church o' Sci . . . All the usual stuff. Still," and he grinned, "*we* are the ones with the tradition of getting stuff *done* . . . But how this got started, this level, that goes way back. The people who designed these places, maybe eighty, a hundred years ago, they had the idea they'd make 'em as self-sufficient as possible. Make 'em grow food. Make 'em heat themselves, generate power, whatever. Now this one, you drill far enough down, is sitting on top of a lot of geothermal water. It's real hot down there, but not hot enough to run an engine, so it wasn't gonna give 'em any power. They made a stab at power, up on the roof, with about a hundred Darrieus rotors, what they call eggbeaters. Had themselves a windfarm, see? Today they get most of their watts off the Fission Authority, like anybody else. But that geothermal water, they pump that up to a heat exchanger. It's too salty to drink, so in the exchanger it just heats up your standard Jersey tapwater, which a lot of people figure isn't worth drinking anyway . . ." Finally, they were approaching a wall of some kind. Bobby

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looked back. Shallow pools on the muddy concrete floor caught and reflected the limbs of the dwarf trees, the bare pale roots straggling down into makeshift tanks of hydroponic fluid. "Then they pump that into shrimp tanks, and grow a lot of shrimp. Shrimp grow real fast in warm water. Then they pump it through pipes in the concrete, up here, to keep this place warm. That's what this level was for, to grow 'ponic amaranth, lettuce, things like that. Then they pump it out into the catfish tanks, and algae eat the shrimpshit. Catfish eat the algae, and it all goes around again. Or anyway, that was the idea. Chances are they didn't figure anybody'd go up on the roof and kick those Darrieus rotors over to make room for a mosque, and they didn't figure a lot of other changes either. So we wound up with this space. But you can still get some damned good shrimp in the Projects . . . Catfish too."

They had arrived at the wall. It was made of glass, beaded heavily with condensation. A few centimeters beyond it was another wall, that one made of what looked like rusty sheetsteel. Beauvoir fished a key of some kind from a pocket in his sharkskin robe and slid it into an opening in a bare alloy beam dividing two expanses of window. Somewhere nearby, an engine whined into life; the broad steel shutter rotated up and out, moving jerkily, to reveal a view that Bobby had often imagined.

They must be near the top, high up in the Projects, because Big Playground was something he could cover with two hands. The condos of Barrytown looked like some gray-white fungus, spreading to the horizon. It was nearly dark, and he could make out a pink glow, beyond the last range of condo-racks.

"That's the Sprawl, over there, isn't it? That pink."

"That's right, but the closer you get, the less pretty it looks. How'd you like to go there, Bobby? Count Zero ready to make the Sprawl?"

"Oh, yeah," Bobby said, his palms against the sweating glass, "you got no idea . . ." The derm had worn off entirely now, and his back and chest hurt like hell. ●

CONTINUED IN NEXT ISSUE

MOONBURN

The skin
becomes so pale

the bones shine through.
—Peter Payack

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ON BOOKS

by Norman Spinrad

MUST THERE BE WAR

A while back in the pages of this magazine, Dr. Asimov and I engaged in a good-natured debate about the relative importance of ideas and characterization in science fiction. The Good Doctor took the position that ideational speculation should be paramount and central to proper science fiction, and that characterization was only a secondary concern in this genre. I took the position that speculation and characterization must be integrated in the ideal science fiction tale; that what counts is a good story, one in which the thematic and speculative content is expressed through a formally pleasing skein of events passing through the lives of characters the reader cares for.

Well of course there are nine and sixty ways of composing even *our* tribal lays, and while each and every one of them may not necessarily be right, certainly there is more than one legitimate species of science fiction story, more than one Platonic ideal of perfection to which to aspire, and therefore, when it comes to literary theories of the ideal science fiction tale, it is quite possible that both Dr. Asimov and myself can be right.

However, when it comes to describing what has long dominated the science fiction that actually gets written and published in the realm of maya, it would seem to be possible for even two such admitted geniuses as ourselves, Isaac, to both be *wrong*.

For what really dominates on the racks is neither ideational content nor emotionally complex characterization, but rather the rendition of violent action undertaken against physical jeopardy.

This centrality of violent conflict to the mainstream of science fiction is so primordial to the genre, so pervasive, so self-evident, that we hardly ever even notice it in these terms. But it *is*, after all, what is really meant by such diverse terms as "action-adventure," "sword and sorcery," "military SF," "galactic conflict," "alien invasion," and more often than not, even Hero and Villain, Good versus Evil.

The portrayal of physical violence, the tendency of protagonist and antagonist to settle their philosophical differences out in the alley, I hasten to add, is certainly

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absent in most of Dr. Asimov's best novels. And indeed, it was his pointing to this fact in defense of his viewpoint that intellectual speculation alone could entirely carry (and in his case had) the successful science fiction novel which caused me to ponder how atypical his work was.

It is, you know. How many science fiction or fantasy novels have you read lately in which no one got punched, shot, stabbed, vaporized, lased, clawed, devoured, or blasted? I'm staring at a great big stack of books right now, and for the life of me, I can't find *one*.

More than half of them have stories in which violent action dominates in terms of both plot dynamics and wordcount. Even the ones which fulfill my ideal of speculative content expressed through the emotional lives of complex characters in morally ambiguous circumstances, like Jack Dann's *The Man Who Melted*, Lisa Goldstein's *The Dream Years*, and James Tiptree, Jr.'s *Brightness Falls From the Air*, are not exempt from a bit of bovver.

David Brin's *The Postman*, an earnestly Jeffersonian treatise on democratic communal idealism with a bit of guilty male feminism thrown in on the side, still expresses these noble ideals through page after page of detailed description of physical combat.

Gregory Benford's *Artifact* is arguably the most thrilling hard science fiction novel ever written, in that Benford is able to keep the reader on the edge of his chair describing the science itself and the doing of it as well as the best "action" writers can puissantly describe scenes of mortal combat. But even Benford feels constrained to factor in subplotting that will justify a violent climax.

Most of the rest, good and bad, are structured along plot skeletons with combat of one form or another at the tension peaks, the physical outcome of which serves as story resolution.

Does it begin to seem that I am overstating the obvious?

Then let me overstate another obvious: life ain't like that, kiddo!

Most of the turning points in our lives are not determined by our prowess with fists, guns, swords, or knives. Most of the emotional apexes and nadirs of our existence take place in bed, or at work, or in the presence of great art, or attempting to balance the checkbook, not in physical combat.

I mean, even what fights we do get into are usually random intrusions, which seldom settle a philosophical, cultural, or political point, and which almost never are satoric moments which permanently alter our personalities.

And yet when we read fiction, and not just science fiction by any means, the protagonists with whom we identify are not only regularly involved in combat, but are required to be able to handle themselves like Bruce Lee when the time comes if we are to accept them as exemplars of moral virtue.

How many times does a sympa-

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thetic hero get the crap kicked out of him by the villain in a fair fight? Even when the hero takes his lumps due to violation of the rules of fair combat by the bad guys, we can generally anticipate with relish a scene in which he punches them out before the tale is over.

But of course life is not like that either. In real life, other factors being equal, a mean psychopathic son of a bitch will usually be able to use a virtuous man as a punching bag in a *mano a mano*. For he feels no empathy for his victim, he *enjoys* hurting people, he's practiced at it; that's why he's *evil*. Whereas the virtuous man, by definition, only fights when he must, to defend himself or others, and therefore lacks both killer instinct and experience by comparison.

So rarely do we see this unfortunate fact of life rendered realistically in science fiction that it is really striking when someone does it right, as Benford does in *Artifact*. Here mathematician John Bishop, the admirable and sympathetic hero, twice gets beaten up by Colonel Kontos, the thoroughly unpleasant villain, and is even bested in a one on one by a woman, without getting to kayo either of them later on. Indeed, even when he has Kontos at machinegunpoint, the proficient Colonel manages to disarm him because Bishop hasn't remembered to take his piece off safety.

On the other end of the spectrum, we have Gordon R. Dickson's *The Final Encyclopedia*, an admittedly extreme exemplar of what in less naked form is all too common. We know that Hal Mayne is the "hero" of this novel because he and Dickson continually remind us, and because he receives the unquestioned obedience and wide-eyed worship due such a figure by most of the other sympathetic characters most of time, and, of course, because he's a genius military tactician who can handle his dukes.

But actually, were we to encounter Mr. Mayne in the real world, we would probably deem him an arrogant high-handed bully and braggart, given to long-winded self-glorifying rapping; a monster of ego demanding our allegiance to his wonderfulness by divine genetic right.

Clearly then, the level and frequency of physical violence in science fiction, the prevalent equation of moral virtue with fighting skill, the manner in which story outcomes are so often determined by prowess in combat, and indeed the clean dualistic razor edge between good and evil, hero and villain, are so out of sync with the realities of our lives that we cannot be dealing with a plethora of failed attempts at realism.

Moreover, in literary terms, it is quite possible to write good novels, and even masterpieces, which follow these parameters faithfully, which is to say that while many literary atrocities have been committed in this vein, the action adventure parameters themselves are

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not necessarily a foolproof formula for crap.

After all, great writers from Homer onward have used these parameters to noble effect, and in the SF canon, writers like Bester, Herbert, Moorcock, Dickson, and even Delaney have from time to time worked this vein successfully with high literary purpose.

So what may at first glance seem like an embarrassing mass misperception of reality on the part of generations of science fiction writers can sometimes really be something else, namely self-conscious anti-realistic stylization; the adoption of certain literary conventions that the author knows full well do not mirror the quotidian reality of the readers but which instead draw their emotional effectiveness from their manipulation of the readers' inner dream landscapes.

After all, since we all consider ourselves the virtuous heroes of our own stories, we would certainly all *like* to have right make might so that we can give that mugger, or the boss, or the Russians, or any other bully with the nerve to kick sand in our faces, the proper thrashing they so richly deserve.

And while few of us experience daily physical combat, most of us know all too well what it feels like to face fear and frustration and injustice, so we can empathize endocrinely with the hero surrounded by enemies and triumph justly in the pages of a book when he finally kicks their asses as we so seldom do over our persecutors in the mundane world.

In the hands of a cynical hack, these action adventure parameters can be responsible for pornography of the most obscene species, the masturbatory manipulation not of our sexual arousal, which at worst may result in compulsive onanism, but of our *violent* arousal, which at best results in a catharsis of suppressed rage, and which at worst results in war.

But in the hands of a master, the very same action adventure morality can be used to write fables, or even archetypal dramas, which, by allowing us to inhabit a more cosmically just universe for the duration, imbue us with the courage to attempt to champion justice in our own.

After all, this *is* the mythic structure of the western, and the samurai film, and the war story, and great swatches of the folk myths of numerous cultures, and so too of much of the folk myths of the future we call science fiction.

Dune, after all, is the story of the dispossessed young prince who flees from his mighty enemies into the mystic sea of the people, returning as their god hero at the head of a popular juggernaut to defeat the forces of evil and become Emperor of the known worlds.

No one has ever told this one better than Herbert did in the original *Dune*. It's all there, and in its higher form. Paul's virtue is the product of genetics to an extent; he, like our own dream image of our-

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selves, is one of destiny's darlings. But when he sheds tears over the man he has just killed in fair combat, he convinces both the Fremen and the reader that he is an exemplar of more complex virtues, a man we may admire for what is in his heart, a true hero in a deeper sense.

And unlike Perry Rhodan, Feric Jaggar, Mung the Barbarian, or Hal Mayne, Paul Atreides, like Dominic Flandry, has a sense of irony about his works and himself. He ends up being Emperor of Everything, but in the process brings on precisely the presciently foreseen jihad he has spent the book trying to prevent. He triumphs over his human enemies, but not over his fated destiny.

It is this masterly telling of the myth we all keep telling ourselves and the moral justice and sophistication which Herbert brings to it that makes *Dune* a masterpiece which has sold zillions of copies and has probably inspired the spirit of many successful lives.

It is the absence of Paul as the hero of the readers' spirit from the subsequent installments that make the rest of the series so dim by comparison.

Lewis Shiner has given us a more modern version in *Frontera*, a well-written first novel in the action-adventure vein, principally set in a lost colony on Mars. *Frontera* rises to literary art, first because several viewpoint characters are rendered with skill and sensitivity as complex people, and second because Kane, the central combat-capable figure, is a poor bastard who's had his head screwed with in various unpleasant ways, so that he is both hero and victim, doing his deeds of derring-do as best he can with a headful of broken glass.

Here we are getting closer to the intersection of myth and reality. Much beyond this point and we are looking at science fiction which *examines* the effect of the myth of the mystic warrior on events in a psychologically realistic world with a somewhat jaundiced eye. Mandela, in Joe Haldeman's *Forever War*, is basically a competent grunt who was drafted into a permanent conflict whose higher political content, such as it is, he views with indifferent contempt. Harry Harrison's *Bill, the Galactic Hero* enlisted like an asshole in an Imperial army run by mental defectives and time-servers keeping an endless war and their jobs going against the Chingers, fearsome lizard-monsters who turn out to be about eight inches tall. In *The Iron Dream*, I attempted to say it in words of one syllable by making Feric Jaggar the wet-dream alter-ego of a hack SF writer named Adolf Hitler.

Mysterious, isn't it? The dominance of this stylized action-adventure myth in science fiction produces masterpieces like *Dune* which speak to and inspire our noblest spirits, earnest attempts at same like *The Postman*, and at the same time, hundreds of novels in which violent combat lovingly described for its

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own sake is the unwholesome raison d'etre.

Thus, perhaps, our fascination, both as a species and as science fiction writers, with war.

War is where the dualistic nature of the action-adventure myth intersects with reality. The battlefield is where we regularly commit our most vile atrocities as a species, and yet the battlefield is also a venue of transcendently selfless heroism.

Moreover, while such moral vices as ruthlessness, psychopathy, blind obedience to power, and sadism can be put to telling use as military virtues, such moral virtues as courage, cooperation, and self-sacrifice for the common good are hardly without their military practicality either. Indeed, in the Battle of Britain, the American Revolution, Viet Nam, and endless science fiction novels, they have enabled militarily inferior forces to prevail.

Small wonder then that science fiction, like the species itself, is fascinated with war. The field of combat is both a butchershop of horrors and the arena of courage and honor, for war is what occurs when irreconcilable opposites clash both on the battlefield and within the heart of each of us.

Those of us who have never known combat secretly wonder whether we have missed a human peak experience. Those of us who have tend to either view our survival through a rosy haze of glory as the time of our lives or are marked by the horror forever, and occasionally both.

So, since war is a central subject of the dreamtime of our species, like it or not, perhaps there is something positive after all to be said for war as a central subject of fiction. Particularly of science fiction.

Most of us, let us hope, will never know combat, and perhaps the fulfillment of that hope will not be so ill-served by science fiction that allows us to contemplate war and physical combat in all its glory, terror, horror, heroism, and moral complexity without risking having our asses blown off.

Of course I'm not talking about military wet-dream fantasies like *Starship Troopers*, Perry Rhodan, or *Star Wars*, in which righteous ingenues get to guiltlessly slaughter faceless gunfodder in alien or robot gook-suits. Nor merciless satires of things military like *Bill, the Galactic Hero*, or *The Iron Dream*, though these certainly have their place as warnings for the innocent.

If we are to survive as a species to reach the stars, or even for that matter much past next Tuesday, we are going to have to come to terms with Mars. As Pogo so aptly put it, "We have seen the enemy, and he is us." As a species, we love war because it is the ultimate drama of life and death, selfless transcendence and egoistic vengeance fantasies, highest heroism and deepest sadism. And in the twentieth century, it is also the cutting edge of wondrous technol-

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ogy, force-fed by grotesque military-industrial banquets at the public trough.

So science fiction that explores this dark conundrum at the heart of our cultures and psyches can certainly be as artistically and morally valid as scientific speculation, sensitive characterization of sensitive characters, or the exploration of civilian political realities, democratic or otherwise.

We have a need as a species for novels like *The Forever War* and *Bill, the Galactic Hero*, which illuminate the assholery of war, and novels like *The Men in the Jungle* and *The Red Magician*, which illuminate the butchery of war, but perhaps we also need novels like *Jannisaries* and *Hammer's Slammers* and *Killer* and even the Conan books, which portray the warrior psyche on its own terms.

That much being said, however, it should also be said that what we *don't* need, and what we do have, is the pervasive permeation of the stylized action-adventure combat formula into so many science fiction novels where it does not belong.

For, political morality aside, this leads directly to a prevalent literary vice: the degeneration of sophisticated storytelling into a stylized plot-skeleton based on escalating sine waves of tension and release, in which stirring scenes of physical combat at the peak points of the plot replace thematic and personal epiphanies as dramatic resolutions.

In *Killer*, by David Drake, author of high tech military SF, and Karl Edward Wagner who comes to the Rome of the tale from sword and sorcery and dark fantasy, we have an honest rendition of what it might have been like for a professional warrior trying to keep his ass covered politically to confront an alien intruder who is even more of a ruthless bad-ass than he is. Lycon and the alien are both the *Killer* of the title, as the denouement brings home in words of one syllable. Believably, Lycon, professional soldier and beast catcher, succeeds via his prowess at the arts he has practiced all his life. Just as believably, he does it by instigating the butchery of an enemy as a tactical diversion.

Lycon is a warrior, but he is a real warrior in a real Rome, he suffers real domestic tragedy, for he knows real love, both carnal and paternal, and when backed to the wall, he is an amoral killing machine.

Killer tells his story with the pain and the sorrow as well as abundant blood and gore. You may not like Lycon by the end, but you will probably come to some empathetic understanding of his viewpoint.

Killer is very much *about* the action-adventure hero and legitimately so, but since the action-adventure hero it is about is a morally ambiguous creature, it becomes in part a meditation on the difference between fantasy heroes and the

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professionals who really do the dirty work.

Gordon R. Dickson's aforementioned *The Final Encyclopedia*, on the other hand, is what happens when action-loops are almost entirely substituted for story, and philosophical expostulation for character development. Long boring speeches and didactic stream of consciousness meditations upon destiny and history are more or less regularly relieved by combat sequences which do little to advance the story, possibly because what little story there is to advance ends abruptly in a cliff-hanger after 696 pages.

Good God, Gordon Dickson knows better than this, as he has proven over and over again, and indeed even in most of the previous books of the Dorsai cycle. Dickson has always been able to render his heroes of destiny believable by grounding their virtues in cultural specificity, and by the sheer subtlety of his psychological descriptions and portrayals of mystical states. While plenty of battle scenes were often de rigeur, the Dickson hero previously rose to apotheosis along a curve of evolving consciousness, so that the conclusion of a novel of derring-do was also the conclusion of a novel of spiritual development.

Here there is no conclusion, we find at the end that this whole thing has been a set-up for a sequel, and Hal Mayne, the protagonist, is a rather unsympathetic shit. He's a *parody* of previously three-dimensional Dicksonian heroes. He expects people to follow on pure Fuhrerprincip, on one occasion even airily declaring that an explication of his plan should not be required by true believers. He enlists in various causes and fights for them as long as it serves his own ends, and then he splits to the next gig in media res.

As a portrait of egoistic swinishness, Mayne might have achieved three-dimensionality, but the people in the novel pop to, click their heels, and acknowledge his wonderfulness.

What happened here?

What seems to have happened here is that Gordon Dickson had a long series of speculative philosophical and political theories he wished to explicate in a novel. What he did not have is a story. So what he did was construct a cardboard character who exemplified and proclaimed the thematic material at exhaustive length, in dialogue, stream of consciousness, and author exposition, and ran him through a series of standard battle loops in between in a problematic attempt to hold the reader's attention.

The first section of *The Final Encyclopedia*, where the young Mayne is exiled for years on a mining planet, is vintage Dickson, the boy growing through adolescence to manhood under extreme and outré pressures, but once Mayne's maturity is attained and he marches off into the action adventure formula spouting somewhat inchoate

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profundities, it is as if another writer took over, one with not half of Gordon Dickson's skills.

Dickson, it would appear, was primarily concerned in this one with summing up a vast social historic schema he had been following in many books, with bringing this cycle to a valedictory conclusion, with creating a masterpiece that would express his grandest visions on the grandest scale.

Like others before him, he may have become so enthused with his philosophy that he failed to notice that he had not crafted a story to exemplify it, indeed that it was almost impossible to do so, and so he contented himself with stringing his lectures along a series of action loops.

Let *The Final Encyclopedia* serve as a warning to all science fiction writers, for potentially, we all have a book like this in us, the novel that will lay out the full brilliance of our thought in exhaustive detail, and the better a writer we are, the more tempting it is to try and write it. Moreover, consciously or not, we observe our collegues getting away with formula action adventure manipulations instead of story, without even attempting our depth of philosophical thought.

Surely we can therefore stop waiting for this mother lode of wisdom to magically cohere into a proper story with complex characters which will render it self-evident and get on with enlightening the world by sugar-coating the symposium with well-written action-sequences.

Surely we had better not.

For when our philosophies take over to the point where they lose their grounding in the psychological complexities and moral ambiguities of the human heart, when we are so convinced of the wisdom of our insights that we seek to impose them by unsubtle main force, why then, we're just like the cardboard warriors we tend to create under such circumstances.

Just like all the heroes of the One True Way who from time out of mind have led us into war. ●

WHY THERE IS NOW (AND MOST PROBABLY ALWAYS WILL BE) A SHORTAGE OF SUBATOMIC PHYSICISTS

Quantum mechanics do it with uncertainty.

—Peter Payack

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INDEX

This index covers Volume 9 of *Isaac Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine,* January 1985 through Mid-December 1985. Entries are arranged alphabetically by author. When there is more than one entry for an author, listings are arranged chronologically in order of appearance in the magazine. All entries are followed by a parenthetical note. These notes are: (a) article; (c) cartoon; (e) editorial; (n) novella; (ne) novelette; (p) poem; (pz) puzzle; (r) review; (s) short story; and (x) crossword. Collaborations are listed under both authors. When a title, a parenthetical note, or an author's name is omitted, it is the same as that of the previous entry.

Alexander, Gary "Buddies" (s) Sep 60
Anderson, Poul "Star Peace?" (a) Sep 22
Athearn, Hope "About an Old Closet" (p) Feb 21
Antieau, Kim "Hauntings" (s) Feb 89
Asimov, Isaac "Sword and Sorcery" (e) Jan 6
——"Slush" (e) Feb 6
——"Magic" (e) Mar 4
——"Dialog" (e) Apr 4
——"Moonshine" (e) May 4
——"The Little Tin God of Characterization" (a) May 24
——"Symbolism" (e) Jun 4
——"Superstupidity" (e) Jul 4
——"Plagiarism" (e) Aug 4
——"Logic Is Logic" (s) Aug 75
——"Star Wars!" (e) Sep 4
——"Fairy Tales" (e) Oct 4
——"Editors" (e) Nov 4
——"He Travels the Fastest" (s) Nov 77
——"Civil War" (e) Dec 4
——"Irritations" (e) Mid-D 5

Benford, Gregory "Time's Rub" (s) Apr 46
Bickel, Bill "Aftermath" (s) Mid-D 66
Bishop, Michael "To a Chimp Held Captive for the Purposes of Research" (p) Jan 117
——"A Gift from the Graylanders" (ne) Sep 38
Blaylock, James P. "Lord Kelvin's Machine" (ne) Mid-D 92
Boston, Bruce "The Berserker Enters a Plea on the Death of Greater Los Angeles: Not Guilty by Reason of Insanity" (p) May 131
——"The Evolution of the Death Murals" (p) Sep 73
Bova, Ben "Primary" (s) Feb 44
Boyle, T. Coraghessan "On for the Long Haul" (s) Aug 100
Brummels, J.V. "Deus Ex Machina" (n) Nov 26
Bunch, David "And Thank You, Tommy Edison" (p) Mar 19
——"One Wish!?" (p) Oct 123

Cadigan, Pat "After the Days of Dead-Eye-'Dee" (s) May 100
Caldwell, John (c) Jan 155
—— May 141
—— Dec 141
Carl, Lillian Stewart "Where is Thy Victory?" (s) Nov 130
Casper, Susan and Gardner Dozois "Send No Money" (s) Mid-D 134

Denton, Bradley "Mountain Shadow: Shawnee County, Kansas" (p) Aug 182
Dozois, Gardner and Michael Swanwick "Snow Job" (s) Oct 104
Dozois, Gardner and Susan Casper "Send No Money" (s) Mid-D 134

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
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Effinger, George Alec "The Beast from One-Quarter Fathom" (s) ... Apr 78
——"Unferno" (ne) ... Jul 84
Eisenstein, Phyllis "Sense of Duty" (s) ... Mar 124
Elgin, Suzette Haden "Lexical Gap" (p) ... Oct 103
—— "Presuppositional Ghost-busting" (p) ... Dec 140

Ford, John "Scrabble with God" (s) ... Oct 121
Fowler, Karen Joy "Praxis" (s) Mar 110
——"The Lake Was Full of Artificial Things" (s) ... Oct 124
——"The War of the Roses" (ne) ... Nov 80
Frazier, Robert "Doppler Effects" (p) ... Feb 192
——"Ed White, Spacewalking, June 3, 1965" (p) ... May 157
——"Paleontologists Who Lived in Backward Time" (p) ... Aug 83
——"Perception Barriers" (p) Dec 71
——"Variations on an Alien Vista" (p) ... Mid-D 65
Frazier, Robert and Andrew Joron, "The Wake of Gravity" (p) ... Nov 75
Frost, Gregory "In Media Vita" (ne) ... Jan 156

Gallagher, Stephen "The Price" (ne) ... Jun 130
Gardner, Martin "Satan and the Apple" (pz) ... Jan 52
——"How's-That-Again Flanagan" (pz) ... Feb 26
——"Relativistically Speaking" (pz) ... Mar 20
——"Bar Bets on the Bagel" (pz) ... Apr 21
——"Catch the Bem" (pz) .... May 18
——"Animal TTT" (pz) ... Jun 24
——"Playing Safe on the Bagel" (pz) ... Jul 38
——"Inner Planets Quiz" (pz) Aug 20
——"Sex Among the Polyomans" (pz) ... Sep 36
——"Puzzles in Flatland" (pz) Oct 20
——"Dirac's Scissors" (pz) .. Nov 20
——"Bull's-Eyes and Pratfalls" (pz) ... Dec 24
——"Flarp Flips Another Fiver" (pz) ... Mid-D 28
Goldstein, Lisa "Tourists" (s) Feb 54
——"Preliminary Notes on the Jang" (s) ... May 112
Grant, Richard "Pages from Cold Harbor" (ne) ... Jun 90
Green, Terence M. "Ashland, Kentucky" (ne) ... Nov 94

Hamill, Pete "From the Lake" (s) ... Mar 120
Hope, Akua Lezil "We Are the New Heat" (p) ... Apr 77
Hunt, J. J. "Stopping at an Undeveloped Planet en Route to Another Galaxy" (p) ... Mid-D 91

Jablokov, Alexander "Beneath the Shadow of Her Smile" (ne) ... Apr 96
Jeffers, Alex M. "Brake" (p) .. Apr 125
Jeschke, Wolfgang "The Land of Osiris" (n) ... Mar 26
Joron, Andrew "Shipwrecked on Destiny Five" (p) ... May 54
Joron, Andrew and Robert Frazier "The Wake of Gravity" (p) ... Nov 75

Kelly, James Patrick "Solstice" (ne) ... Jun 148
Kessel, John "A Clean Escape" (s) ... May 170
Killough, Lee "Deathglass" (s) Apr 113
Kilworth, Garry "The Final Assassin" (s) ... Jan 106
——"The Lost Garden of Enid Blyton, Beatrix Potter, Lucy Atwell and the Rest of the Lads of the 32nd Parachute Regiment" (s) ... Mar 136
——"The Thunder of the Captains" (s) ... Jun 112
Knight, Damon "A Fantasy" (s) ... Jun 88

Leigh, Stephen "Shaping Memory" (ne) ... Sep 88
Lombardy, Dana "Gaming" (a) Jan 28
—— ... Feb 22
—— ... Mar 22
—— ... Apr 18
—— ... May 17
—— ... Jun 22
—— ... Jul 16
—— ... Aug 18
—— ... Sep 20
—— ... Oct 24
—— ... Nov 24
—— ... Dec 20
—— ... Mid-D 24

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

McCarthy, Shawna "Up Front" (e) ..... Mid-D 4
McDonald, Ian "Scenes from a Shadowplay" (s) ..... Jul 66
Maltzberg, Barry N. "Quartermain" (s) ..... Jan 120
Martin, George R.R. "Portraits of His Children" (ne) ..... Nov 144
——"Empire Dreams" (ne) ... Dec 34
Minnion, Keith "Empire State" (ne) ..... May 78
Minsky, Marvin "Toward Artificial Intelligence" (a) ..... Dec 28
Mooney, Gerry "Mooney's Module" (c) ..... Jan 188
—— ..... Feb 10
—— ..... Mar 11
—— ..... Apr 17
—— ..... May 17
—— ..... Jun 17
—— ..... Aug 181
—— ..... Sep 17
—— ..... Oct 182
—— ..... Nov 179
—— ..... Dec 21
—— ..... Mid-D 125
Mueller, Richard "The Day We Really Lost the War" (s) . Sep 74
Murphy, Pat "On a Hot Summer Night in a Place Far Away" (s) ..... May 158

Nelson, M.L. "Eurydice Back in Hades" (p) ..... Jul 179
Norment, John (c) ..... Apr 95
—— ..... May 169

Palwick, Susan "The Woman Who Saved the World" (s) ..... May 142
——"*The Universe is Far Dustier Than Expected*" (p) .. Jun 61
——"The Early Universe is Much Simpler Than the Weather" (p) ..... Sep 59
——"Ways to Get Home" (s) Mid-D 80
Pohl, Frederik "Fermi and Frost" (s) ..... Jan 80
——"The Things That Happen" (ne) ..... Oct 46
Popkes, Steven "Deathwitch" (s) ..... Feb 76
Purtill, Richard "Gorgonissa" (s) ..... Jan 129

Rainbow, Tom "Superintelligence!" (a) ..... Jan 31
——"Love-Potions" (a) ..... Apr 24
——"The Science Fiction of Sex-Change" (a) ..... Jul 18
——"The Mad Scientist's Primer" (a) ..... Oct 24
Randall, Marta "Undeniably Cute: A Cautionary Tale" (s) .... Feb 71
——"Sea Changes" (s) ..... May 126
Robinson, Kim Stanley "Green Mars" (n) ..... Sep 112
Rucker, Rudy and Bruce Sterling "Storming the Cosmos" (n) ..... Mid-D 144

Sallis, James "Need" (s) ..... Jan 153
——"Impossible Things Before Breakfast" (s) ..... Jul 81
Sanders, Scott Russell "Ascension" (s) ..... Feb 100
——"The Tree of Dreams" (s) May 56
Schorb, E.M. "Spring and the *Black Holes*" (p) ..... Jun 182
Searles, Baird "On Books" (r) Jan 180
—— ..... Feb 184
—— ..... Apr 182
—— ..... May 183
—— ..... Jun 183
—— ..... Aug 183
—— ..... Sep 183
—— ..... Oct 183
—— ..... Dec 183
—— ..... Mid-D 183
Sheffield, Charles "Tunicate, Tunicate, Wilt Thou Be Mine?" (ne) ..... Jun 26
Shepard, Lucius "The End of Life As We Know It" *(ne)* Jan 54
——"How I Spent My Summer Vacation: A Student Perspective on Clarion" (a) .. Feb 31
——"How the Wind Spoke at Madaket" *(n)* ..... Apr 126
——"The Fundamental Things" (ne) ..... Jul 40
——". . . How My Heart Breaks When I Sing This song . . ." (s) ..... Dec 116
Shiner, Lewis "The War at Home" (s) ..... May 74
Shirley, John "The Incorporated" (s) ..... Jul 109
Silverberg, Robert "Sailing to Byzantium" (n) ..... Feb 128
Spinrad, Norman "Transatlantic Science Fiction" (r) ..... Mar 183
——"Alternate Viewpoint" (a) Jun 62
——"Inside, Outside" (r) ..... Jul 180
——"World War Last" (n) .... Aug 116
——"Books Into Movies" (r) . Nov 180
Sterling, Bruce "Dinner in Au-

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ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

doghast" (s) ..... May 38
——"Green Days in Brunei" (n) ..... Oct 136
Sterling, Bruce and Rudy Rucker "Storming the Cosmos" (n) ..... Mid-D 144
Strauss, Erwin S. "The SF Conventional Calendar" ..... Jan 194
—— ..... Feb 194
—— ..... Mar 94
—— ..... Apr 192
—— ..... May 192
—— ..... Jun 192
—— ..... Jul 192
—— ..... Aug 192
—— ..... Sep 192
—— ..... Oct 192
—— ..... Nov 192
—— ..... Dec 192
—— ..... Mid-D 192
Swanwick, Michael "The Transmigration of Philip K." (s) Feb 112
——"Anyone Here From Utah?" (s) ..... May 126
Swanwick, Michael and Gardner Dozois "Snow Job" (s) .. Oct 104
Swift, Jennifer "Marie" (ne) .. Jun 70
Swofford, Avon "Taking the Low Road" (ne) ..... Oct 74

Tem, Steve Rasnic "The Dreaming Machine Dreams of the Future" (p) ..... Apr 61
——"The Dreaming Machine Acquires Legs" (p) ..... May 125
Tiptree, James, Jr., "All This and Heaven Too" (ne) .... Mid-D 30

Van Scyoc, Sydney J. "Meadows of Light" (ne) ..... Dec 158

Warren, Karin C. "Wavering" (p) ..... Jun 19
Watson, Ian "The Wire Around the War" (s) ..... Mid-D 126
Weiner, Andrew "Klein's Machine" (s) ..... Apr 62
Wightman, Wayne "In the Realm of the Heart, In the World of the Knife" (s) ..... Aug 84
Wilhelm, Kate "The Gorgon Field" (n) ..... Aug 22
Willis, Connie "And Who Would Pity a Swan?" (s) ..... Jan 95
——"The Curse of Kings" (n) Mar 142
Wilson, Robert Charles "Boulevard Life" (s) ..... Dec 142
Wolfe, Gene "The Nebraskan and the Nereid" (s) ..... Dec 132
Wolfe, Ron "The One-Shoe Blues" (s) ..... Nov 124
Wylde, Thomas "The Spinning Kingdom" (s) ..... Jan 143
——"Marooned on Planet Earth" (s) ..... Mar 96

Yolen, Jane "Into the Woods" (p) ..... Feb 110
——"An Infestation of Angels" (s) ..... Nov 85
Young, Robert "O, Little Town of Bethlehem II" (s) ..... Dec 106

Zelazny, Roger "24 Views of Mt. Fuji, by Hokusai" (n) ..... Jul 124

NEXT ISSUE

Nebula-winner Gregory Benford returns to *IAsfm* next issue with our February cover story, "Of Space-Time and the River," a powerful novelette that takes us to the shadow of the Pyramids for an encounter with a race of enigmatic aliens who are strangely fascinated with Egypt's ancient past.... This is Benford at his best; don't miss it.

Also in February, Orson Scott Card makes his debut appearence in *IAsfm* with "Salvage," a bittersweet story about faith and disillusionment in the days After Things Fall Apart. Also featured is the second installment of Nebula and Hugo-winner William Gibson's big new novel, *Count Zero*, as well as stories by R.A. Lafferty, Molly Gloss, and William F. Wu. Plus our usual columns and features. Look for the February issue on your newsstands on January 14, 1986.

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SF CONVENTIONAL CALENDAR

by Erwin S. Strauss

Things are pretty quiet over the holidays, but they'll be picking up soon. Make plans now for social weekends with your favorite SF authors, editors, artists and fellow fans. For a later, longer list, an explanation of cons, and a sample of SF folksongs, send me an SASE (addressed, stamped #10 (long) envelope) at 4271 Duke St. #D-10, Alexandria VA 22304. (703) 823-3117 is the hot line. If a machine answers, leave your area code & number. I'll call back on my nickel. Early evening's usually a good time to call cons. Send an SASE when writing cons. For free listings, tell me abour your con 6 months ahead. Look for me at cons with a "Filthy Pierre" badge.

DECEMBER, 1985

27-29—**EveCon.** For info, write: **Box 128, Aberdeen MD 21001.** Or phone: **(703) 823-3117** (10 am to 10 pm only; not collect). Con will be held in: Gaithersburg MD (near Washington DC) (if city omitted, same as in address) at the Holiday Inn. Guests will include: none announced yet. Costumes.

JANUARY, 1986

17-19—**RustyCon, Box 47132, Seattle WA 98146.** Vonda McIntyre, artist I. Mayer, fan J.Surayan.

24-26—**ConFusion, Box 8284, Ann Arbor MI 48107.** Detroit MI. Somtow Sucharitkul. Banquet.

25-26—**ChimeraCon, 12-A Univ. Gardens, Chapel Hill NC 27514.** Orson Scott Card, Christopher Stasheff, Gregory Frost, Manly Wade Wellman, David Drake, Allen Wold, M. A. Foster, John Kessel.

FEBRUARY, 1986

7-9—**MexiCon, 24a Beech Rd., London N11, UK.** Birmingham, England. At the Strathalian Hotel.

14-16—**Boskone, Box G, MIT PO, Cambridge MA 02139.** Boston MA. Big (over 3,000 there last year).

21-23—**SFeraCon, Ivanicgradska 41A, Zagreb 41000 Yugoslavia.** Free membership to non-Yugoslavs.

21-23—**OnoCon, 6-2740 Brentwood Blvd. NW, Calgary AB T2L 1J4 Canada.** A thaw-out for frozen fans.

21-23—**WisCon, Box 1624, Madison WI 53701. (608) 251-6226 (days), 233-0326 (eves).** Feminist SF.

28-Mar. 2—**ConQuistador, Box 15471, San Diego CA 92115.** At Town & Country Motel. 3rd annual.

28-Mar. 2—**PhoenixCon, 752½ N. Highland Ave., Atlanta GA 30306. (404) 875-7326.** David Brin, Sharon Webb, Robert Jordan, Harriet MacDougald, Brad Strickland. Masquerade. A new con this year.

MARCH, 1986

7-9—**LunaCon, Box 6742, FDR Sta., New York NY 10150.** Tarrytown NY. Madeleine L'Engle, Marta Randall, Dawn Wilson, Dowager queen of East Coast cons, once the only big one. Just north of NYC.

7-9—**KatoniCon, Box 3974, Gaithersburg MD 20878.** Gaming emphasis. Same Holiday Inn as EveCon.

7-9—**BayFilk, Box 424, El Cerrito CA 94530 (415) 528-3172.** San Jose Ca. SF folksinging con.

7-9—**ConCave, Box 90962, Nashville TN 37209.** Park City KY. John Hillis. Relaxed con at a resort.

20-23—**NorWesCon, Box 24207, Seattle WA 98124. (206) 723-2101 or 789-0599 or 453-8550.** Anne McCaffrey, Kelly Freas, Greg Bennett, Spider Robinson. Over 100 writers and other pros expected. Stardance, masquerade, SCA tourney (medieval fighting), fan olympics, Philip K. Dick award given.

AUGUST, 1986

28-Sep. 1—**ConFederation, 2500 N. Atlanta #1986, Smyrna GA 30080. (404) 438-3943.** Atlanta GA. Ray Bradbury, fan/editor Terry Carr, B. (Slow Glass) Shaw. WorldCon for 1986. Join for $35 in 1985.

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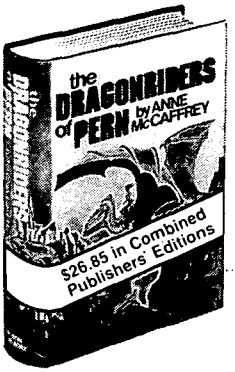

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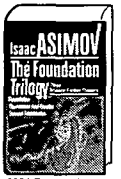

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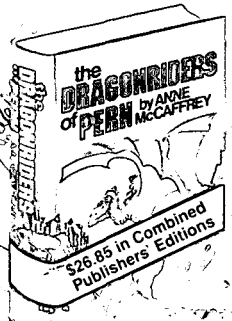

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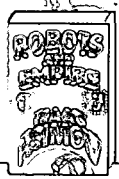

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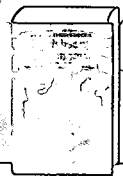

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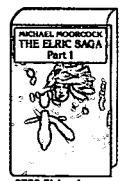

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